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ABSTRACT

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH
COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENTS WITHIN
CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

by

Lea Danihelova

Adviser: David Sedlacek

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH COGNITIVE
IMPAIRMENTS WITHIN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

Name of researcher: Lea Danihelova

Name and degree of faculty adviser: David Sedlacek, PhD

Date completed: January 2024

This study was initiated with the primary objective of delving deep into the spiritual experiences of individuals living with cognitive impairments. The research was centered on seven young adults with cognitive impairment who were members of the Christian communities of faith and resided in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. The study focused on giving voice to these young people since there were no studies about the spirituality of people with cognitive impairment done in central Europe. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was chosen as the research method due to its capacity for facilitating personal interactions, thus enabling a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of these individuals. The researcher tried to be an objective observer but as in all phenomenological research, the researcher's life journey and worldview were

taken into account. The data collection method employed semi-structured and unstructured interviews, which yielded statements that formed the basis of the analysis. Additionally, this study provides detailed participant profiles, offering a contextual backdrop for their narratives within the framework of their individual personalities and life contexts.

As the interviews progressed, certain themes started to emerge. Upon revisiting and reflecting upon the statements of the participants, a deeper understanding emerged regarding the remarkable spiritual capacity exhibited by these individuals. Their narratives delved into profound philosophical questions, encompassing concepts of morality, guilt, and their existential roles within the world. Their quest extended beyond the mere search for God; it was a simultaneous journey of self-discovery guided by divine influence. Remarkably, their endeavor encompassed a dual mission: self-improvement not only for personal growth but also for the enhancement of their relationship with God and their commitment to the welfare of their fellow beings.

The narratives offered a perspective transcending self-centeredness, in stark contrast to the ego's typical self-prioritization. These individuals demonstrated an innate selflessness, readily extending support and assistance to others while acknowledging their own imperfections. Their yearning for a reality beyond the confines of the present world coexisted with a keen awareness of their own limitations. The central finding of this study lies in the profound depth of their cognitive and emotional capacities and in the fact that indeed, in the words of one of the participants, “we are not so different and we are all equal”.

Their unwavering connection with God, even in the face of adversity, serves as a poignant testament to their steadfast faith. This connection illuminates their resilience in the face of challenges. There are implications for Christian communities, families, and wider society in connection to the unused potential of people with cognitive impairment. This research unequivocally underscores their ability to forge a spiritual connection with God—an active and transformative interaction that enriches not only their own spiritual journeys but also the broader tapestry of the congregational experience.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH
COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENTS WITHIN
CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Lea Danihelova
January 2024

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APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

Faculty Adviser, David Sedlacek
Professor of Family Ministry and Discipleship
& Lifespan Education

Director of PhD Program, Discipleship &
Lifespan Education
Jasmine J. Fraser

Alina Baltazar
Professor & MSW Program Director
of Social Work

Dean, SDA Theological Seminary
Jiří Moskala

Luana Greulich
Director of Special Education

Shannon Trecartin
Associate Professor of Social Work

Dawn Morton
Director of Advanced Degree Programs and
Assessment & Assistant Professor of Christian
Formation and Leadership, Ashland Theological Seminary

Date approved

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my youngest brother, David, in recognition of his steadfast support and constant presence during every challenge and circumstance. Thank you for your practical advice, listening ear, and tangible help. You are indeed one of a kind.

Furthermore, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my husband Miroslav, and to our children Vladko, Skarlet, and Lukas for their impact on my life and growth. Those experiences, both positive and negative, have shaped me into who I am today, enhancing my strength, empathy, and awareness of diversity. I hope that your lives will be filled with joy and bring happiness to those you encounter.

Thank you!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All people are equal.

Abraham Lincoln

Knowledge is the beginning of tolerance, and tolerance is the beginning of understanding.

John Wesley Coulter

Exceptional, special, but also impaired, handicapped, or simple minded. Persistent, pure, and child-like, but also slow, struggling, and falling behind. Equal opportunity and acceptance, but also separation, estrangement, and distance. There are thousands of images and labels that come to mind when thinking about people with cognitive impairment, about people with brain disorders that affect their ability to think and reason.

The concept of spirituality also evokes various words, sounds, rituals, feelings, and definitions: transcendence, mysticism, and ethereal, but also God, divine, and holy; intangible, metaphysical, and incomprehensible, but also personal, communal, and revealed; ascetic, self-denial, and sacrifice, but also abundance, laughter, and joy. Most of the words have, in common, the idea of searching or attempting to connect with the transcendent and to be influenced by it (Scrogie, 2011).

Both spirituality and cognitive impairment are terms covering a broad spectrum of

views. Cognitive impairment can be seen as a curse, blessing, or simply a fact of life. Spirituality can be seen as a basic trait of one's identity inherent to all humans, but also as a characteristic derived from one's identity that is specific to those who choose to believe. To make things even more complicated, even within a specific scope of Christian spirituality where the transcendent is identified as the Creator God, there is a spectrum of views about the ways of connecting with God. On one end are those who focus on the individual and the mystical and see God as love; on the other are those who believe in connecting with God exclusively through His Word and law as interpreted by the communities of faith and who see God as the judge of this world.

Among all of these theories, labels, and definitions live people with cognitive impairment. They might be considered "disabled, and therefore unable to live in Christ" (Webb-Mitchel, 1993, p. x); they might not know the specific doctrines of their denomination. However, as Webb-Mitchel (1993) said in describing the spiritual experiences of people with disabilities, they simply live the Christian faith. They connect with God. They understand God's love, not as an abstract idea, but as a very concrete and personal experience.

Background of the Problem

Postmodern society is known to promote inclusion and equality in the midst of diversity. Despite this fact, there are still groups of people who are marginalized in many areas and, sadly, even in many Christian communities. Webb-Mitchel (1996) wrote about "scandalous injustice" and "spiritual abuse" of cognitively disabled people in American society, in general, and Christian churches, in particular (p. 47). Hoeksma (1995) and Harris (2006) stressed the fact that people with cognitive impairment need spiritual

freedom and self-determination. However, many people, like me, might not even be aware of their own prejudices simply because they do not come into close contact with a person with cognitive impairment or because they do not have enough information on the topic.

Some hold the idea that people with cognitive impairment are unable or strongly limited in developing spiritually. They are believed to lack their own “spiritual identity” and are seen as merely copying mechanically the behavior of people around them. However, Thomas (2008) did not identify any significant correlation in his study between spiritual development and cognitive deficits. This confirmed the claims of Swinton (1997) who was persuaded that

the essence of our relationship of grace is that it is initiated and sustained by God in a way that lies outside our current understanding, and as such is independent of our cognitive abilities. . . . The sovereign Spirit of God has an inherent unpredictability which enables it to proceed on a plane with human comprehension and knowledge, which will not allow it to be bound by man-made dogmas, definitions, or requirements. (pp. 22, 24)

Research on the spirituality of people with cognitive impairment is scarce. The majority of the research of spirituality of people with cognitive impairment is focused mainly on older people developing dementia (Béphage, 2008; Dalby et al., 2012) or support necessary for family members of a person with cognitive impairment (Haworth et al., 1996). However, as Harris (2006) argued, more research is necessary that focuses on the spirituality of people with intellectual disabilities. Understanding the formation and nurturing of the spirituality of this people group can help us to help more of them to find God in Christian communities of faith.

Statement of the Problem

Christian churches do not have a clear view of the spirituality of people with intellectual impairments. The problem goes even further since our cognitively-oriented Western culture finds it easy to forget people who are intellectually impaired. Christian congregations, namely Protestant congregations, base knowing God primarily on the literal understanding and verbal exegesis of the “Word of God.” People with intellectual barriers, those who are not able to comprehend and communicate their thoughts and feelings, have often been left out. It is easy to leave these people to the care of families or social services. It is common to tolerate them in our congregations. Christian service should go deeper than allowing them to be present. There is a clear need to find out more about the spirituality of people with cognitive impairments. A better understanding can bring not only acceptance, but also inclusion in Christian communities of faith.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand better the spirituality of certain Christian young people with cognitive impairment living in Bratislava, Slovakia.

General Methodology

The attempt to understand the lived spiritual experiences of young people with cognitive impairment will be studied using a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach. Phenomenology describes the researched phenomenon as lived and experienced by an individual. The spiritual identity of young adults with cognitive impairment will be generally defined as internalized characteristics of an individual in regard to

experiencing, living, and expressing a relationship with God.

Research Question

This study proposed to address the question of how young people with cognitive impairment who were a part of Christian communities of faith experienced their relationship with God.

Potential Significance of the Research

In the 21st century, world cultures, ideologies, and ways of life are becoming inseparably intertwined. It is important that the Christian church adopt the spirit of inclusion and learn to share the message of love in ways appropriate to different groups of people. Studies show that contemporary young people look for authenticity, community, and, surprisingly, also spirituality. Their spirituality is not centered primarily on dogmas and fundamental beliefs, but on relationships and experiences (Cunningham et al., 2009; Dudley, 2016).

Young people with cognitive impairment are part of society and are influenced by the existing culture. Changes in technology and in the level of democracy gave access to more possibilities for people with cognitive impairment to develop and to experience life. The opinions of people are harder to change, and there is still a lot of prejudice and rejection of people with cognitive impairment by a big part of society. However, there are also those who have started to view people with cognitive impairment as individuals who have a place in society and stories to tell (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002).

The Christian church has tried to catch up with postmodern approaches and introduce spirituality to the contemporary generation in a manner that attracts and

engages youth. Young people with cognitive impairment also need to be included in this new approach. Some of the core characteristics of Christianity are acceptance, love, and equality for all, not just for those whom one chooses to accept, love, and consider equal. Among the “all” are also included people with cognitive impairment. This study attempted to add one more step on the way to the inclusion of people with cognitive impairment in the lives of spiritual communities by describing and interpreting the spiritual experiences of young people with cognitive impairment and by attempting to understand better the meaning of their spirituality as a lived phenomenon. This will hopefully challenge Christian communities to evaluate their approaches and service to young people with cognitive impairment, as well as to motivate further research in the area of spirituality and Christian service to people with cognitive impairment.

Limitations of the Research

The major limitation of the study was the fact that it is hard to generalize subjective experiences of a small group of young people with cognitive impairment who were willing and able to participate in the research. Thus, the primary applicability of the research was limited to a very narrow group of individuals, even though the general understanding of the phenomenon, the secondary applicability, could apply to a much wider group of people.

The second limitation was tied to the ability to understand and interpret correctly the meaning of shared verbal and non-verbal communication with young people with cognitive impairment, to stay open to their world, but at the same time, to be able to interact with my own experiences, pre-understanding, and assumptions. As a researcher, I brought to the research my experiences as a special educator who has focused on working

with youth with cognitive impairment, as well as my experiences as a foster mother of a son with cognitive impairment. I recognized that these experiences would be reflected in my approach and interpretation of the research. However, they also provided necessary skills and understanding of the specific communication techniques and needs of people with cognitive impairment. My experiences also helped me to establish a rapport with the participants.

The last major limitation of the study that I have recognized was the ability of language to capture something so intangible and often abstract as spirituality, as well as the ability to use correct words to describe it. On the other hand, this gave me an incentive to be intentional about the language and to seek help from other people, especially in the process of analysis which, in turn, brought more weight to the research results.

Delimitations of the Research

The research was intentionally delimited to young people with mild to moderate cognitive impairment who were able to communicate orally on a comprehensible level. The reason behind this delimitation was the fact that cognitive impairment is a very general category. People with cognitive impairment vary significantly from each other, and results gathered from the group of people with deep cognitive impairment might be significantly different from the results of the group of people with mild or moderate forms of cognitive impairment. The participants were in the age group of 15 to 30 years of age. The group of participants was further delimited by the facts that they all lived in southern Slovakia in the capital city of Bratislava and they all participated in Christian

communities of faith. The study concentrated on the relationship of individuals with cognitive impairment with God.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section of this study serves to establish a theoretical and theological framework for the exploration of spirituality among individuals with cognitive impairment. As the phenomenon has not been fully conceptualized in prior research, the review was conducted with the aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Although the research design was exploratory in nature and did not adhere to a specific theoretical framework, the literature review serves to discuss the interpretation of the study's findings based on the previous research. The content of the review specifically encompasses a variety of topics related to the inclusion of individuals with cognitive impairment within Christian communities of faith, a biblical understanding of cognitive impairment, and the definitions of spirituality and religiosity. In addition, the review sought to understand the nature of spirituality and spiritual/faith formation among individuals with cognitive impairment, thus providing a detailed and nuanced framework for the study's investigation. Overall, the literature review section serves as a critical component of the study, providing the necessary context and theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis of the research findings.

Definition of Cognitive Impairment

Cognitive impairment, outlined in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2022), refers to neurodevelopmental disorders categorized as intellectual disabilities that emerge in childhood. These conditions encompass not only intellectual challenges but also difficulties in conceptual, social, and practical aspects of daily life. Identification of intellectual disability occurs when deficits in both intellectual and adaptive functioning become apparent from childhood. Standardized IQ tests evaluate intellectual functioning, while adaptive functioning involves challenges adhering to societal standards, impeding individual independence.

Historically, classification heavily leaned on IQ tests, segregating individuals with cognitive impairments into mild, moderate, severe, and profound categories based on IQ scores. However, the most recent classification manual now considers adaptability, the individual's ability to function in society, and the support needed for achieving independence in determining categories.

Those with mild and moderate cognitive impairment display slower development in conceptual, social, and daily living skills. Although they can acquire practical life skills, enabling them to function with minimal support in ordinary life, individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities can independently care for themselves, navigate familiar community settings, and acquire fundamental safety and health-related skills. This study specifically concentrates on this group.

Individuals with severe cognitive impairment encounter substantial developmental delays, possess limited communication skills, and necessitate supervision

in social settings. They often rely on family care or reside in supervised environments such as group homes.

Those with profound cognitive impairment commonly exhibit congenital syndromes, rendering them incapable of independent living. They rely on close supervision and assistance with self-care activities, frequently demonstrating restricted communication abilities and physical limitations.

Cognitive Impairment and Christianity

The treatment of individuals with cognitive impairment has undergone significant changes in certain parts of the world, particularly within the fields of social work, medicine, and education. Inclusion has become a key focus, leading to improvements in the lives of many individuals with cognitive impairments. Rather than secluding these individuals in institutions, as was common practice for extended periods throughout history, efforts are being made to facilitate their participation in wider society to the fullest extent possible with the aim of providing a higher quality of life. However, religious institutions have not always kept pace with this trend.

“Throughout much of history, people with disabilities were seen as living proof of sin, either their own or that of their parents, and were viewed as reminders of sin and shame that needed to be hidden” (Lysaght et al., 2010b, p. 476). Such individuals were viewed as reminders of sin and shame that must be hidden, often leading to the diminished status of families or communities with members who have cognitive impairments. In this context, the sin was seen as something to be eradicated and purified from one’s life, and families or communities often responded by removing individuals

with cognitive impairments from their sight. Unfortunately, such attitudes can lead to radical approaches, as evidenced by the Nazis' T-4 or euthanasia program during World War II which targeted individuals with mental or physical impairments (Hepburn, 2014).

Despite changes in mainstream Christian attitudes towards cognitive impairment, the topic of spirituality for individuals with cognitive impairments remains largely undiscussed in Christian circles. Consequently, members of congregations are often left to their own devices to explain cognitive impairments. "The uncertainty, ignorance and lack of experience of disability can lead to the development of stereotypes, prejudices, avoidance, and discrimination" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 1166).

In the Judeo-Christian tradition the act of naming starts in the story of creation as God creates, separates, names, and blesses the earth, sky, and all that has life, and then invites man and woman to help in the act of naming. Naming thus brings some things into existence by recognizing it. ... A name could signify worth, reputation, function, transformation, and ownership. (Gaventa, 2018, p. 13)

The name given to things has power; it informs of the ways the thing or person should be perceived. People with cognitive impairment were called mentally retarded or intellectually or developmentally disabled. "The ableist worldview holds that disability is an error, a mistake, or a failing, rather than a simple consequence of human diversity, akin to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender" (Gaventa, 2018, p. 13). It supported the Christian view of the cognitive impairment as a handicap or disability that needed to be fixed.

Medical research and social movements in the field of disability have brought attention to the importance of emphasizing the humanity and individuality of persons with disabilities, including those with cognitive impairment. As a result, there has been a shift towards the use of people-first language, such as "person with cognitive

impairment,” rather than labeling individuals as “cognitively impaired.” According to a study by Lysaght et al. (2010a), the use of people-first language is an important aspect of promoting the inclusion and dignity of individuals with disabilities, including those with cognitive impairment. The authors stated that “people-first language reflects a respect for the individual’s humanity and individuality and is consistent with human rights and social justice principles” (p. 479).

This perspective views cognitive impairment as a form of diversity that is inherent within human society, with the emphasis placed not on differences, but on the commonalities and unique qualities that enrich us all. Research by Tuffrey-Wijne et al. (2013) emphasizes the need for a person-centered approach to disability, stating that “disability is a part of human diversity, and needs to be accepted, respected, and valued as such” (p. 11). This includes the inclusion of individuals with cognitive impairment in religious communities, as these communities play a significant role in the lives of many individuals.

However, a study by Jones et al. (2013) found that many families of individuals with cognitive impairment experienced exclusion and discrimination within religious communities. The authors noted that “religion is often perceived to be incompatible with disability, leading to exclusion and discrimination” (p. 1168).

These findings suggest that while there has been progress in promoting the inclusion of individuals with cognitive impairment, particularly through the use of people-first language, there is still a need for greater awareness and acceptance within religious communities.

John Aurelio talked from his own personal experience as a chaplain working in the Christian communities of faith. “He noted that people not familiar with people with disabilities usually go from fear/hate to pity to anger to love. ... Love is the arrival at a sense of mutuality, shared gifts, and contributions” (Shapiro, 1994, p. 27). Gaventa (2018) claimed that this

model is also a framework for talking about the transition that a congregation can undergo as it seeks to welcome and include people with disabilities. ... Many congregations have evolved to ministries with people with disabilities and their families and, finally, to ministries by people with disabilities, recognizing the gifts that individuals and families bring to others. ... Spirituality and religion thus has great power to shape both personal and social constructs of disability and experiences related to it. (p. 90)

Old and New Testaments and Cognitive Impairment

The author of Hebrews stated: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1 ESV). Faith, even unseen, is, according to the Bible, not just some abstract thought, but it is a way to power by which we can move mountains (Matt 17:20), by which our prayers are answered (Matt 21:22), by which we are healed (Acts 3:16), by which we live (Hab 2:4; Gal 2:20), and by which we are saved (Eph 2:8). There are different amounts of faith (Rom 12:3). Some excel in faith (2 Cor 8:7). The faith of others is weak (Rom 14:1), but Paul observed that faith can also increase (2 Cor 10:15; 2 Thess 2:3). When Christ comes to take His people to His heavenly kingdom, he will be looking for those who have faith (Luke 18:8). Who are those who can have faith? Who are God’s children? Are people with cognitive impairment also among them?

Rabbi Julia Watts Belser (2016) talked about the Old Testament’s perspective on people with impairments. The first is the principle of the *b’tselem Elohim*, a Hebrew

phrase that means “in the image of God.” It refers to the belief that all human beings are created equal and with infinite value because they are made in the image of God.

According to the book of Genesis, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). This verse is seen as the basis for the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of each individual regardless of race, gender, religion, impairment or any other factor. It emphasizes the importance of treating others with respect and dignity and of recognizing the inherent worth of every person. In addition, it is seen as a call to work towards creating a more just and equal society where the rights and dignity of all individuals are protected and respected. This idea can also be found in many other places throughout the Old Testament (Lev 19:18; Deut 10:17–19; Prov 14:31).

The second is the principle of *areyvut*, referring to the idea of mutual responsibility and inclusiveness within the community. It means that each member of the community has a responsibility to support and care for one another, and that no one should be left to struggle alone. The belief in *areyvut* extends beyond just the care of individual members of the community; it also encompasses the obligation to work for the betterment of society as a whole. This includes the responsibility to help those in need, to advocate for social justice, and to work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable world. The principle of *areyvut* is included in the commandment in Lev 19:18 to “love your neighbor as yourself,” which is seen as the basis for the idea of mutual responsibility within the community.

Another example can be found in Deut 7–8: “You shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend

him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.” This verse emphasizes the obligation to care for those in need and to support one another. The concept of *areyvut* is also reflected in this famous statement in Exod 22:20: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” This verse underscores the idea that all members of the community, regardless of their background or status, are entitled to support and protection, and that it is the responsibility of each person to ensure that no one is left to struggle alone.

The third principle is *kavod*, which expresses the idea that freedom must be grounded in respect for the agency and dignity of every person. This principle holds that all individuals have the right to make choices and to act according to their own free will as long as their actions do not harm others or violate their rights. It emphasizes the importance of treating others with respect and dignity and of recognizing that each person is a unique and valuable individual with his/her own desires, needs, and goals.

The principle of *kavod* is reflected in a number of biblical teachings and commandments. For example, Lev 19:14 states, “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” This verse underscores the obligation to respect the agency and dignity of others and to avoid actions that would infringe upon their freedom or autonomy.

The fourth principle consists of *tsedek* and *tikkum olam*. *Tsedek* refers to the obligation to act fairly, honestly, and with integrity and to pursue righteousness in all one’s dealings. Isaiah 1:17 states, “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” In Deut 16:20, the importance of justice is emphasized in this commandment: “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue.”

Tikkum olam is the obligation to repair the world and make it a better place. The concept is derived from Gen 1:28:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

This verse is interpreted by some as a call to repair and care for the world. In addition, Prov 14:21 states: “He who despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is kind to the poor.” This is seen as an example of the importance of working to repair the world by helping those in need.

Even though we might not find the explanation of cognitive impairment in the Old Testament and there are no concrete verses telling us how to behave toward people with cognitive impairment, the Old Testament clearly talks about the principles of fairness, inclusion, care, justice, respect, and the dignity of each individual without exclusion.

The New Testament supports the idea that all individuals, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, are created in the image of God and possess inherent worth and dignity. Jesus frequently interacted with individuals who had various disabilities (Mark 9:17–27), showing compassion for all. James 1:27 states, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” This verse highlights the responsibility of the community to care for those who are marginalized and vulnerable, including those with cognitive impairments.

Furthermore, the New Testament encourages individuals to value the contributions of all people, regardless of their abilities. In 1 Cor 12:12–26, Paul uses the

metaphor of the body to illustrate the idea that each member of the body, regardless of its function, is important and valuable. This passage emphasizes the importance of valuing and supporting all individuals, including those with cognitive impairments, and recognizing their unique contributions to the community.

In the New Testament, impairment is not seen as a punishment or a result of sin, but rather as a part of the human experience. In John 9:1–3, Jesus’ disciples asked Him who sinned to cause a man to be born blind. Jesus’ response, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life,” underscores the idea that disabilities can serve a greater purpose and bring glory to God.

Finally, the New Testament teaches that all individuals, including those with cognitive impairments, have the potential to receive salvation and have a personal relationship with God. Romans 10:9–13 states:

If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

This demonstrates that salvation is not dependent on one’s abilities or disabilities, but rather on one’s faith in Jesus Christ. John 3:16 states: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This verse highlights the universality of God’s love and the availability of salvation to all individuals. Ephesians 2:8–9 states: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” This passage highlights the idea that salvation is not dependent on one’s good works or abilities, but rather, on the grace and forgiveness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament also does not use the words “cognitive impairment” and it does not specify this group of people. However, as in the Old Testament, we can see the idea of inclusion, the idea of faith and belief as available for everyone, and the universality of salvation based on Jesus’ sacrifice as opposed on one’s efforts. The New Testament teaches us to value and support all individuals, regardless of their abilities, and to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of all as children of God.

Faith is available to everyone. The Christian communities of faith have a role to present faith to everyone in a way that is relevant to them. Faith has to be something “believable,” something that people can have a firsthand experience with. Christians need to take time to provide this experience in such a way that it will reflect the developmental level of a particular person in all areas, that will fulfill her/his needs, and that will be presented in such a way that a person is able and willing to listen. “To be Christian is to ask: What can I bring to another? Not: What do I want that person to know or be? It means being open to learn from another person” (Barna, 1996, p. 17), even a person with cognitive impairment.

Spirituality

Spirituality has a wide range of meanings, mostly depending on personal experience and worldview (Swinton & Pattison, 2010, p. 236). Therefore, spirituality is similar to cognitive impairment, a social construct. Constricting it by definitions may actually bring about the exact opposite of its function in our society. Swinton and Pattison (2010) mentioned that “it is probably important that spirituality remains a contested and functional concept rather than becoming consolidated if it is usefully to denote the kinds of contextual absences that need to continue to be recognized and

worked with” (p. 236). Balswick et al. (2005) further underlined the idea that “spirituality ... is a uniquely human phenomenon that defies simple psychological explanations” (p. 245).

Canda (2012) based on his research, concluded that people overall ascribe to spirituality a variety of different attributes, thus making it “an intrinsic and irreducible aspect of the person” (p. 3). This includes individual development, relationship with the environment, all aspects of an individual, the search for meaning and purpose, a loving relationship with all that exists, and understanding human suffering and alienation. In other words, integrating everything from the mundane, everyday, worldly aspects of life to transcendental aspects of existence.

Granstrom (as cited in Hitchens, 1988) explained that spirituality is often built upon difficult situations in one’s life when “the illusion of security is shattered” (p. 26). He later added that these become spiritual encounters that force us to “seriously search for meaning and purpose of life” (p. 26). Such situations, dubbed by Karl Jasper as “limit situations” (as cited in Fuchs et al., 2013, p. 48), are often what set spirituality in motion. Fundamental questions of our life and existence are often the first conscious contact with the concept of spirituality.

Spirituality was for centuries closely related to one’s religious experience. However, even as the world is progressing towards secular experience, spirituality remains an important part of life and even “appears to be attracting widespread attention not only among people who are interested in religion but among therapists, members of other helping professions such as medicine and nursing, artists, writers, and the media” (Fenn, 2008, p. 319). Klímová and Fialová (2015) stressed the importance of

differentiating spirituality and religion, but agreed that because of our cultural history, it is not entirely possible: “Spirituality is not religion. It’s a far wider, bigger and broader concept. However, in this part of the world, religion is the most common way of fulfilling the need of human spirituality” (p. 112). Bloom (2011) agreed that “we need to perceive and appreciate what lies at the very heart of religion and separate its essence from form” (p. 2). He further explained that this is needed because spirituality is “of profound benefit to ourselves and those around us” (p. 2).

The general attitude in the Western world “emphasizes the holistic aspect of spirituality—the idea that spirituality pervades everything and yet is more encompassing than any of its specific manifestations” (Wuthnow, 2003, p. 274). Wuthnow (2003) further showed how spirituality is prevalent among other not necessarily religious groups such as artists. Their audiovisual works make spirituality specifically visible. Art, in different shapes and forms, talks about “God, religious diversity, spiritual aspects of the body, nature, time, social problems, and transcendence” (p. 274).

Spirituality in this way then becomes an echo of our lives and of the situation we are currently experiencing. Because of this, the sociological perspective sees spirituality as extremely useful when understanding one’s conditions. “There is ... strong agreement that claims about spirituality can be usefully examined in relation to social conditions but cannot be fully explained by or reduced to these conditions” (Fenn, 2008, p. 318).

As a useful and indispensable tool of mental health, spirituality is generally believed to have many different benefits. Bloom (2011, p. 16) counted among them, for example, the development of empathy, being good towards self and others, prompting inspiring strength which guides people through hard times, a sense of meaning which is

not dependent on the ideas of others, the feeling of peace which helps not only mental but also physical health, and finally, a deep and profound appreciation of life and living.

Christian Spirituality

Christian spirituality could be described as a “sacred spirituality” (Holloway & Moss, 2010, p. 179). Thus, in other words, a spirituality connected to the transcendental, the divine. According to Abraham Maslow this represents the ultimate human need—“the need for transcendence, for deeply understanding that humans are a part of a larger whole—humanity, nature, Earth and finally universe” (as cited in Říčán, 2007, p. 233).

In the case of Christianity, this unmistakably represents God. It is directly connected with the human experience of faith in God. It shows the natural, Christian desire to live a “fulfilled and authentic religious life” (McGrath, 1999, p. 2). It “is not a disembodied experience—as with many Eastern religions or New Age groups—but an embodied experience, affirming the reality of human existence” (Estep & Kim, 2010, p. 5). From the Christian perspective, spirituality is not just an abstract concept, but something that we can actively develop and cultivate. As Yount (2010, p. 28) pointed out, this is a very important distinction between the Christian and secular outlook on spirituality. Spirituality is understood as a “higher” human capacity both in relation to society and in relation to God (Brown et al., 1997, p. 25). McGrath (as cited in McDonald, 2006, p. 104) “defines Christian spirituality as God-centered, not man-centered, and based on objective truth, not subjective experience that is others-focused.”

As Wood (1989) pointed out, it may be seen in a very intimate and personal way as “the communion of the believer with God” and “the response of the human spirit when activated by the Spirit of God” (p. 311), but in a more general sense, “spirituality [also]

represents the interface between ideas and life, between Christian theology and human existence” (McGrath, 1991, p. 3).

Spirituality, even if understood, perhaps, under different terms, was seen in Christianity as something inseparable from faith and God throughout history. Christian theologians for centuries understood and expressed this notion. Even though “medieval spirituality will be to some extent, cursory” (Peters, 2021, p. 14), it already laid the groundwork for the study and research of future theologians. In his discourse on Thomas à Kempis, Peters mentioned that Kempis already saw the unique standing of Christian spirituality. He saw that for “those with no faith who claim to be “spiritual,” it would be more accurate to think of them as “carnal but not religious” (p. 14, 129). After all, for Christian people, “spirituality has an important influence on thinking, experiencing and individual being itself” (Vojtíšek et al., 2012, p. 232). Later, this idea of spirituality naturally continued in Protestant thinking and thus remained present throughout all Christian denominations (Grislis, 1994, p. 1).

Christian spirituality is, therefore, almost inseparably connected to the Holy Spirit as the expression of God in our practical, day-to-day lives. Weismayer (1994) described spirituality as a spiritual life of people converted in Christ, thus a life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (p. 9). As such, Christian spirituality is inherently “practical, concrete expression of life with Christ through the communion with the Holy Spirit” (Kodet, 2007, p. 87).

This also means its growth is directly dependent on religious practice. McGrath (1999) pointed out that there are “explicitly devotional practices which have been developed to foster and sustain that relationship with Christ. Christian spirituality may be

thus understood as the way in which Christian individuals or groups aim to deepen their experience of God” (p. 8). Such practices include prayer, reading Scripture, and communion with other members of the same religious groups.

As Kohut (2007) put it, Christian spirituality is an expression of our relationship with Christ, but still subject to our earthly life:

Everyone has an original journey to Christ. This journey is unique and is expressed in a certain way also outwardly. It is a result of cooperation between men and God, who are God’s instruments, with free will to live, but also an inspiration given by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, humans live in specific conditions, therefore their faith must be acculturated—accommodated to certain conditions. (pp. 34–35)

Even though Christian spirituality is a concept unified in the Holy Trinity, the experience is still unique to the individual. After all,

spiritual practices are influenced by social conditions, just as other religious beliefs and activities are. Age, gender, level of education, region and religious background are likely to shape people’s propensities to engage in spiritual practices as well as content of these practices. (Wuthnow, 2004, p. 308)

Thus, just like spirituality itself, even Christian spirituality cannot be contained in a single explanation, and “perhaps all of these views are, in fact, pieces of the whole portrait of God’s image in humanity with our spiritual capacity serving as the common denominator of them all” (Estep & Kim, 2010, p. 19).

Religiosity

Even though religiosity, spirituality, and religion itself are all very closely connected, they are certainly not substitutes for each other. Religiosity represents “religious attitudes of an individual or a group” (Jandourek, 2001, p. 203). Unlike religion, religiosity does not have to be part of doctrines or institutions. It very often represents internal experience which does not have to be necessarily a part of further

adherence to a specific religious faith or group. Sekot (1985) further defined religiosity as “faith in supernatural beings and phenomena and participation in activities connected to these beliefs” (p. 246). He explained that formal teachings of different faiths or churches are not important in regard to religiosity. What is important is the active effects of these teachings on an individual. Therefore, when we talk about religiosity, we talk about how religion is realized in the lives of different groups of people. Perhaps we could say religiosity asks these questions: How does an individual process religion and how does that influence his life and living? (Sekot, 1985, p. 246).

In order to understand religiosity better, it is helpful to look at Glock and Stark’s (1965) categorization of religiosity into five different dimensions: “experiential, ritualistic, ideological, intellectual and the consequential” (p. 20). In other words, religiosity includes the dimension of the ideology to which a certain religion adheres; the dimension of practicing religion in all its forms; the dimension of supernatural or transcendental experience; the dimension of intellectual understanding of religious beliefs, especially based on religious texts; and finally, the dimension of consequences that some or all of the above have on human life (Glock & Stark, 1965, pp. 70–71).

It is clear that religiosity is deeply subjective and subject to individual’s sociological, cultural and otherwise personal situation. We cannot “discover a single origin or essence” of religiosity (Fuller, 1994, p. 115).

Religiosity can change and evolve depending on age, surroundings, or even economic situation. This is especially visible in what Gordon Allport called an extrinsic religiosity. It is religion “used by people who want self-serving, comfort-seeking religion” (as cited in Fuller, 1994, p. 115). This type of religiosity is especially

determined by outer forces, but none of these is internalized. They are subject to rapid change and do not translate into deeper internal experience of life.

On the other hand, intrinsic religiosity is demonstrated in internalized religious beliefs. These, then, often become the main force in the life of an individual and in his/her everyday decisions. What Glock and Stark (1965) called the ritualistic dimension of religiosity becomes an everyday part of one's life. "Intrinsic religion is religion lived for its own sake, sacrificial, loving religion" (Fuller, 1994, pp. 115–116).

Development of Faith

Development of faith has been described many times in theoretical perspectives. Among some of the main current representative and recognized models are those of Kim's Christian faith formation; Yount's triad of life; James Fowler's faith development theory; James Loder's theory of transformation; and Balswick et al.'s model of faith formation.

Estep & Kim (2010) like many others who proposed models of faith development, underlined that "for a more complete portrait of Christian formation, we must not limit our search to the Scriptures alone but include God's creation as a source of revelation" (p. 51). Therefore, they very often base their faith development models on prior psychological studies of human development. These include psychologists Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Eric Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, and others. We can often see a correlation in the two models since faith development can be in direct response to specific age groups. However, age correlation is not definite, and some people can achieve a specific state of their faith when they are even younger/older than expected, especially depending on the age the person is converted (Ševčíková, 2004, p. 108–120).

Estep & Kim (2010, p. 80) asserted that faith is formed in the context of intellectual development. This corresponds to Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories of human intellectual development. Similarly, Estep and Kim saw faith as consisting of "two parts: belief and trust" (p. 80), both of which he understood to be part of intellect. "Belief ... is an intellectual recognition and acceptance of truth, which we affirm and accept" (p. 80). On the other hand, trust is "a volitional act of faith" and it "generates confidence in or reliance on something or someone that we believe to be trustworthy" (p. 80). In this way, belief and trust require intellectual knowledge.

Summing this up then means that "spiritual life is not a mere intellectual or perceptual experience but both. It involves holistic engagement of the mind and heart that allows us to anchor theoretical and practical knowledge to our faith" (Estep & Kim, 2010, p. 89).

For Yount (2010), faith development has to include comprehensive holistic learning in order to produce well-balanced growth. He suggested that there are three major learning systems—psychological spheres—"cognitive (rational), humanistic (personal), and behavioral (active) learning—thinking clearly, feeling and valuing deeply, and doing skillfully" (p. 336). In order to achieve optimal faith development, one should be able to strive to understand clearly God's truth that is expressed in the Scripture, have a deep and subjective experience with God, and finally, practice all of this in his/her life. Ideal faith development, then, is reached when "all three circles are the same size, and all three intersect equally" (Yount, 2010, p. 336). However, reality is often different, and one of these three pillars overtakes faith's development, resulting in an unbalanced spiritual

life. Therefore, we have to have our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ who is the only pure example of the perfect and balanced Triad (Yount, 2010, p. 337).

James Fowler provided a theoretical framework for faith development which has been a foundation for further research for over thirty years (Parker, 2010). His theory, similar to Estep and Kim's, is grounded in Piaget's thinking and even more strongly correlates faith development with age development throughout one's life (Ševčíková, 2004).

Fowler (1981) described the development of faith as a universal principle, not particularly a Christian faith. According to his definition, faith is "person's or group's way of responding to transcendent value and power as perceived and grasped through forms of the cumulative tradition" (p. 9). Fowler correctly understood that there is a development of faith. However, in an attempt to measure faith as a general human experience, he established universal measurable categories such as cognition or moral reasoning. These would be more properly included under moral and cognitive developmental theories such as Kohlberg's, Piaget's, or Erickson's. Therefore, Estep and Kim (2010) concluded that the Fowler's six developmental stages of faith do not describe faith but "a reality very similar to the biblical phenomenon of wisdom" (p. 190).

The first stage is *primal faith*. In this pre-verbal stage of infancy, it is imperative for both psychological as well as religious development, in later years, to gain foundational trust. "The child is learning to be 'at home' and happy in the world" (Estep & Kim, 2010, p. 6). Another stage is *intuitive-projective faith*. "At about age two a revolution begins to happen for the child. ... We see the child awakening to a world of reality beyond, around, and penetrating the everyday" (Fowler, 1999, pp. 41–43). Next,

in *mythic-literal stage*, the child develops “concrete operational thinking. Stable categories of space, time, and causality” are developed (Fowler, 1999, p. 43). The *synthetic-conventional faith* stage starts in adolescence and brings the wondrous forming of one’s own identity. “God is often perceived as a friend, a guide” (Ševčíková, 2004, p. 6). The *individuating-reflective faith* stage “is based on a clear sense of reflective identity, a firm set of ego boundaries, and a confident regard for one’s conscious sense” (Fowler, 1999, p. 51). *Conjunctive faith* emerges in middle adulthood and “combines deep, particular commitments with principled openness to the truths of other traditions” (Fowler, 1999, p. 54). Thus, in a sense, “conjunctive faith can be taken as the normative end point of the faith development sequence” (Fowler, 1999, p. 58). The final stage is *universalizing faith*, “however, it is not for everyone to reach this stage” (Fowler, 1999, p. 60). People who achieve this stage, such as Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi, “seem to have undergone an experience of the negation of ties” (Fowler, 1999, p. 59).

In Fowler’s example, we have seen that defining faith in a broad category, outside of specific religious tradition (Christian tradition in our context), does not bring the desired results. The Bible clearly states that our faith should be based on Jesus (Gal 2:16; Heb 12:2). Therefore, a faith without Jesus is just a philosophical construct not a living faith of the Bible.

Loder (1998) understood this distinctive Christian perspective of faith which is developed in the human spirit. He does not distinguish the exact stages of faith development, even though he established general theological issues that people usually deal with at different ages. However, he acknowledged the non-linear continual

development of faith that is originated by God and continually influenced by the Holy Spirit. This development is separate from other developments that can influence faith development, but they do not determine it.

The development of ego and all its various competencies (for example, language, intelligence, moral judgment) unfolds along a different axis from that of spiritual development. The two axes of development may intersect and complement each other, but they diverge preeminently as to primary aim. (Loder, 1998, p. 72)

The goal of the ego would be physical survival of the body. The aim of the human spirit is unity with God. From this perspective, faith is focused more on relationship with God, on deepening the intimacy with God, than on the rational understanding of God.

According to Loder, spiritual development often brings radical changes into persons' lives through the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming moments. For Loder,

spiritual development does not occur through increased understanding of religious beliefs or universal truths, but rather it is through the deepening of our intimacy of God that the Spirit is released more fully in our lives. Through this spiritual presence of Christ we are given meaning, guidance, hope and motivation to act. (as cited in Balswick et al., 2005, p. 274)

As described above, Fowler saw faith development as linear, corresponding to age development of humans through their lives. On the other hand, Loder (1981) came with an alternative, suggesting that faith is also non-linear and can include a radical transformation by the Holy Spirit. When the individual is "following the prompting of the fourth dimension as it prepares the latent sense of the Holy within to turn outward toward the Holy beyond" (p. 102). Thus, it is through the "initiative of the Holy" (p. 102) that our faith development can have an extreme turn which would not correlate with the usual psychological development models.

According to Loder (1981) this spiritual transformation happens in five stages: conflict, interlude for scanning, insight, release and redirection of energy and finally interpretation and verification (p. 38).

Finally, the faith formation model, called the Differentiated Self Theory, proposed by Balswick et al. (2005) based on the work of Murray Bowen, combines both Fowler's faith development theory and James Loder's theory of transformation. By combining these two models, Balswick et al. came to the conclusion that "humans are not able to initiate faith, but faith is a gift from God" (p. 283). The theory is based on a differentiated faith development which is defined similarly to Loder's faith as an experience of "intimacy with God that allows for communion with the Godhead and does not sacrifice the particularity of the individual" as well as "a life that responds in action to the mutual love of the Creator and created" (p. 275). Differentiated faith incorporates both spiritual and religious. It incorporates both Fowler's stages of faith development and "acknowledges that differentiated faith may be influenced by psychological development in many ways—but not exclusively" (Balswick et al., 2005, p. 283), as well as Loder's stress on God's intervention and relational aspects of faith.

The differentiated faith theory reflects the complexity of human beings by pointing out that

spiritual development is the nonlinear process of increasing the capacity for self-transcendence, care for others and devotion to and intimacy with God... This recognizes that with spiritual development, the development of certain human functions, such as identity and moral, civic and cognitive development, will grow in a nonlinear manner based on interactions with a person's content. (Balswick et al., 2005, pp. 283, 279).

The biggest value of the differentiated faith theory is pointing to the richness and complexity of spiritual and religious development. "It does not seek homogeneity in

development but allows heterogeneity... It allows for mentally handicapped adult to have a profound sense of faith based on an experience of a loving relationship with God” and not basing the faith experience on cognitive challenges as it is in Fowler’s model.

(Balswick et al., 2005, pp. 283, 278)

The development of differentiated faith is modeled by the multiple strand spiral which indicates nonlinearity of faith development. The strands represent different aspects of human development (physiological, psychological, social, etc.). The spiral penetrates through different spheres (family, school, religion, etc.). The thunderbolt touches the spiral that indicates the divine intervention, the action of the Holy Spirit which “may interrupt and reorder the development of the human spirit at any point” (Balswick et al., 2005, p. 283).

The differentiated stage theory tries to describe the faith development encompassing the complexity of human life, focusing on general ideas and the big picture. Based on this theory “the purpose of human life is to deepen intimacy with God, which occurs directly through encounters with the spiritual presence of Christ and also through the family of God” (Balswick et al., 2005, pp. 283, 274).

Research into Cognitive Impairment and Spirituality

There is a dearth of literature concerning the spirituality of individuals with cognitive impairment and the impact of spirituality on their lives despite the abundance of studies on the inclusion of this population in various domains such as social work, healthcare, and education. Although several studies have examined the involvement of young people with cognitive impairments in congregations and their perception of faith, these studies relied mainly on responses from parents or other caregivers, rather than

from the individuals with cognitive impairments themselves (Carter, 2013; Abells et al., 2008). Research suggests that individuals with cognitive impairment tend to participate primarily in the practical aspects of faith such as prayer and church attendance but does not provide firsthand accounts from individuals with cognitive impairment themselves.

In a study conducted by Carter et al. (2015), the National Core Indicator survey data were analyzed to investigate attendance at religious services and religious involvement among individuals with cognitive impairment. The study comprised a sample of 12,706 adults with intellectual impairment in the United States. While the research did not specifically focus on the spirituality of individuals with cognitive impairment, it provided valuable data since it was not targeted towards individuals who attended communities of faith. The results indicated that nearly half of the participants attended religious services at least once a month, and over a third usually attended religious services at least once a week, which is comparable to individuals without cognitive impairment. However, the survey revealed that this was not the case for individuals with severe disabilities or multiple impairments, where barriers to attending were more significant. The exclusion of individuals with significant cognitive impairments has an impact on their quality of life, as well as on theological implications. Despite this, overall, individuals with cognitive impairment participated in religious activities at a much lower rate than individuals without cognitive impairment. It is important to note that a limitation of the study was that the questionnaire responses were very often provided by caregivers or other adults who were familiar with the participants. In addition, while the study focused on church attendance, it did not explore whether attendance was voluntary or whether faith was a significant part of the individual's life.

The study conducted by Turner et al. in 2004 explored the involvement of individuals with cognitive impairment in communities of faith, rather than solely focusing on Christian faith communities. The findings revealed that although the participants possessed strong religious identities, they felt that their faith was not acknowledged by these communities and that their involvement was limited to attending services and prayer. These results support the need for further research to ensure that individuals with cognitive impairment have a voice within communities of faith.

Previous research by Swinton (2001) suggests that religion and spirituality can positively impact an individual's overall health and provide sources of meaning-making, self-worth, friendship, and social support. However, despite these benefits, there is limited evidence of religious communities fully integrating individuals with cognitive impairment. Despite this lack of inclusion, individuals with cognitive impairment expressed the fact that faith was crucial in their lives and had a positive impact, providing them with meaning and coping mechanisms for life's challenges. Therefore, further research is necessary to promote inclusion and ensure that individuals with cognitive impairment have the opportunity to benefit from the positive impact of faith communities.

Conner (2012) emphasized the potential for transformative experiences and the importance of forming friendships with individuals with disabilities. He suggested the fact that true humanity and beings made in the image of God are rooted in personal relationships, rather than in functional or power dynamics. This highlights the significance of including individuals with disabilities in faith communities and should go beyond mere attendance.

Slocum's (2016) research indicates that individuals with cognitive impairment may attend faith communities, but their level of participation is typically low. However, active involvement in these communities has been found to improve their quality of life significantly. Slocum's study highlights the critical importance of the meaningful inclusion of individuals with cognitive impairment in faith communities. While Slocum's research draws on existing literature and research, he noted that only 18 articles had been published on the topic as of the study's conclusion, underscoring the need for further research in this area.

The findings highlight the need to move beyond the mere physical presence to ensure that individuals with disabilities, particularly cognitive impairment, are fully included in faith communities. By fostering personal relationships and genuine friendships, we can promote transformative experiences and enhance the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. Further research is necessary to continue advancing the inclusion of individuals with cognitive impairment in faith communities.

Liu et al. (2014) conducted a study to explore the expression of spirituality and the understanding of disability in the context of faith among young people with cognitive impairment. The study aimed to fill a gap in existing literature and to investigate the importance of faith in the lives of individuals with cognitive impairment. The findings suggest that young people with cognitive impairment express their faith in a similar manner to those without cognitive impairment. The study highlights the fact that faith is a vital and significant component of their identity.

Despite the limited sample size, the study reveals that individuals with cognitive impairment can communicate their beliefs and the importance of faith in their lives. The

findings underscore the necessity of engaging individuals with cognitive impairment in discussions about their faith in order to comprehend what is meaningful to them and how they understand it. Therefore, the study recommends further research in this area to understand better the role of faith in the lives of individuals with cognitive impairment.

The results of this study have significant implications for the inclusion of individuals with cognitive impairment in faith communities. By acknowledging the importance of faith in their lives and engaging in meaningful discussions, faith communities can enhance the participation and inclusion of individuals with cognitive impairment. Further research in this area will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of faith in the lives of individuals with cognitive impairment and how faith communities can better support them.

Most studies on the experiences of people with intellectual impairment and their understanding of faith have been conducted in the USA or England. However, one study conducted in China, specifically in Hong Kong, has shed light on the importance of the church's willingness to listen to those who are often perceived as powerless. The study also revealed that individuals with intellectual disabilities face significant barriers when it comes to engaging with matters of faith. These barriers are often rooted in the perception that people with cognitive impairment are inferior in matters of faith or are incapable of coming to faith. One of the main reasons for this is that traditional evangelical spirituality is often based on Bible study, which may not be accessible to individuals with cognitive impairment.

Despite these challenges, the study showed that it is possible to research the religious experiences of people with cognitive impairment using appropriate

methodologies. As Shea (2019) noted, “the religious experience of the people with cognitive impairment ‘are researchable if an appropriate methodology is in place’” (p. 19). Therefore, there is a clear need for further research into the spirituality of individuals with cognitive impairment, as well as into the evangelical model of spirituality and the ways in which people come to faith.

Given the importance of faith in the lives of people with cognitive impairment, it is essential to prioritize their inclusion in discussions about their faith. This can help us gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives, as well as identify ways to overcome the barriers they face in engaging with matters of faith. In this way, we can ensure that individuals with cognitive impairment are not excluded from spiritual and religious communities, but instead, are valued and supported in their pursuit of faith.

Summary

This chapter aimed to provide a theoretical framework that explores the relationship between spirituality and cognitive impairment within the context of Christian theology and practice. It is noteworthy that the Bible strongly advocates for the inclusion of individuals with cognitive impairment and emphasizes that they are capable of connecting with God. However, despite this, society and faith communities still have a long way to go in fully integrating individuals with cognitive impairment into their communities. While some research has been conducted on the role of faith in the lives of individuals with cognitive impairment, the studies have been limited to small cohorts, highlighting the need for further investigation of diverse groups of individuals with cognitive impairment to develop comprehensive theories concerning the significance of faith in their lives.

The proposed framework is grounded in Christian theology and is intended to guide researchers and practitioners in their efforts to understand and support the spiritual needs of individuals with cognitive impairment. The framework draws upon the biblical teachings that emphasize the value and dignity of every human being regardless of his/her cognitive abilities. It also highlights the importance of creating inclusive and welcoming faith communities that foster meaningful connections between individuals with cognitive impairment and their peers.

The framework proposes that spiritual growth is a universal human need that is not dependent on cognitive ability. Individuals with cognitive impairment should have the same opportunities to develop and express their spirituality as those without cognitive impairment. The framework emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing the unique spiritual experiences of individuals with cognitive impairment, which may differ from those of individuals without cognitive impairment.

The proposed framework also underscores the importance of effective communication since individuals with cognitive impairment may face challenges in articulating their spiritual experiences. Inclusive and accessible worship services, as well as pastoral care that is tailored to the unique needs of individuals with cognitive impairment, are essential for fostering their spiritual growth and wellbeing.

In conclusion, this chapter presents a theoretical framework that seeks to promote a deeper understanding of the relationship between spirituality and cognitive impairment within the context of Christian theology and practice. The framework underscores the importance of valuing and including individuals with cognitive impairment in faith communities and highlights the need for further research in this area.

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

“There is no perfect research model which can be used for all situations: to be effective, research must be tailored to fit the specific problem” (Pratt & Loizos, 1992, p. 1). The problem of this study was in describing and interpreting the spiritual identity of people with cognitive impairment. The goal of the third chapter is to identify the research method that is the best tool for reaching this objective. This chapter brings information about qualitative research, in general, and hermeneutical phenomenology, in particular. The rest of the chapter will focus on specific features of hermeneutical phenomenology in the areas of describing myself as a researcher, sampling of participants, data collection, data analysis, validating and evaluating criteria, and anticipated ethical issues.

Qualitative Research Strategy: Phenomenology

Qualitative research was “born out of concern to understand the ‘other’” as a balance to “traditionally conducted social science research [that] has silenced many groups marginalized and oppressed in society by making them the passive object of inquiry” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 4). Due to the fact that the focus of this research is to give voice to people with cognitive impairment by describing their spiritual identity, qualitative research is a fitting methodology. Qualitative research is flexible in the sense that a researcher focuses on emerging themes, not on preconceived ideas or hypotheses.

The lives of participants often look different from the inside than from the outside. “Like a camera with many lenses, first you view a broad sweep of the landscape. Subsequently, you change your lens several times to bring scenes closer and closer into view” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 27). In this research, it must be remembered that we are not studying mathematical formulas, but living people who are often not predictable and/or classifiable. However, here lies one of the beauties of qualitative research: If the research was done well, the results could be very personal, in-depth, and often surprising, even for me.

Qualitative research is closely connected to the philosophical assumptions of the researcher. Therefore, before proceeding with the description of phenomenology, I will briefly examine my basic philosophical assumptions, namely ontology and epistemology.

Ontology and Epistemology of the Researcher

I consider myself to be a postmodern researcher whose basic worldview is Christian which, in my case, means that I believe in the existence of absolute truth, absolute reality. This defines me as a scholar and a scientist. As a postmodern, I do not claim to possess the truth and to know what is real. However, contrary to postmodern assumption, I claim that there is a reality that is objective. I also claim that there is a way to know pieces of this reality, but never fully grasp it because its ultimate whole is hidden in God. However, people are able to measure, observe, experience, and admire certain aspects of reality.

From this perspective, the objective reality is understood at two different levels. The objective is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as “not dependent on the mind for existence.” The objective that people can claim to know is defined as “not (being) based

(solely) on personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts.” In my opinion, people can access the objective reality only through the subjective lenses of their own experiences and understanding. This does not mean that people are not able to discover objective reality, but rather, that they are never able to possess the reality, to fully explain it, to claim that they have arrived.

The way in which science develops reveals that even “objective laws” are often based on consensus influenced by present-day levels of knowledge and the needs of individuals and societies. Therefore, postmodern scientists, especially in the qualitative areas of study, do not claim to explain or reach any absolute reality but from the perspective of observant participants, they aim to describe and at least partially understand experiences as they happened. They are describing and interpreting the lived reality as they know it, not necessarily the absolute truth. From this perspective, reality is not the ultimate objective truth, but comes to life through the interpretation of human experiences that define it and give it meaning. In this approach, there is a place for doubt and uncertainty even in scholarly research. There is a place for creativity and intuition, flexibility and awe.

The postmodern approach does not try to segregate reality by focusing on the particular, but rather, seeks to see the particular in the context of the whole, to weave the small pieces of reality (as seen by individual subjects) to form a bigger picture. At the same time, I, as a researcher, understand that this bigger picture is formed from small, valuable pieces and that the bigger picture is still not the big picture, the ultimate reality.

As a Christian postmodern researcher, I appreciate the possibility to say I observe, I believe, I doubt, and I am bewildered. I appreciate the possibility of studying the areas

that are not possible to measure, but that are nevertheless inseparable and important parts of reality as viewed and experienced by people.

Descriptive and Hermeneutic Phenomenology

A researcher who decides to conduct qualitative research has to choose a methodology that would fit her/his type of research problem. If the study focuses on the common meaning of stories of several individuals, a phenomenology is an excellent approach.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that “describes the meaning of the lived experiences of several individuals about a concept of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The phenomenologist focuses on describing a phenomenon, an experience that all the participants have in common. The goal is to understand the phenomenon “in depth,” to “come to the bottom of it,” to grasp its very nature. The phenomenologist does not try to describe the whole experience of an individual or culture group or to form a theory, but to understand truly the essence of the particular phenomenon as experienced by the participants and structured through consciousness (Moran, 2002; Friesen et al., 2012). Phenomenology is deeply rooted in philosophy, and researchers using this method need to understand and identify carefully their own philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2013; Lewis & Staehler, 2011; Zahavi, 2002).

The different philosophical assumptions and different needs of individual fields of study gave birth to different types of phenomenology which can be traced back to two major schools of phenomenology, namely Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology and Heidegger’s hermeneutical-interpretative phenomenology (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). The roots of phenomenology are based in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1859-

1938), a German mathematician who believed that the intentional conscious experience, where the “researcher’s prejudices, preconceptions and beliefs” are suspended, is the source of knowledge (Converse, 2012, p. 23). Thus, through using specific phenomenological data analysis methods such as phenomenological reduction, the researcher can come to an understanding of the true universal essence of the phenomenon, the mutual characteristics shared by all who experience the phenomenon. Trying to understand the phenomena of lived experiences is, according to Husserl, a road of searching for wisdom, a basic goal of philosophy (Converse, 2012; Creswell, 2013). Husserl emphasized the fact that reality is formed through individual experiences of the phenomenon and its “meaning is projected onto the object by the perceiving subject” (Dowling & Cooney, 2012, p. 22). The role of the researcher, according to Husserl, was to describe the phenomenon and abstract its essence without adding his/her own perceptions or interpretations. Husserl’s school of phenomenology is known as descriptive phenomenology supported and further developed by researchers and philosophers such as Duquesne, Merleau-Ponty, Giorgi, Polkinghorne, or Moustakas (Flood, 2010).

Husserl’s approach to phenomenology was highly criticized. The main argument was, in the words of Paley, “the idea that it is possible to identify the ‘essence’ . . . of the phenomena” (Dowling & Cooney, 2012, p. 24). One of Husserl’s critics was his student Martin Heidegger who was not satisfied with merely describing the phenomenon. He tried to “see beyond the ‘normal, everyday meanings of life to see the larger meaning in being’, . . . to uncover hidden meaning . . . and move beyond description to interpretation” (Dowling & Cooney, 2012, p. 24). Heidegger focused on the investigation

of ontology, trying to find the meaning of being, in contrast to Husserl, who focused on epistemology, trying to find the nature of knowledge (Converse, 2012). Heidegger saw a bigger picture, connecting the object of study not only with the world, but also with the experience of the researcher. Heidegger was persuaded that bracketing as understood by Husserl does not only limit the research but is, in fact, impossible. The researcher needs to know his or her presuppositions and pre-understanding. However, they are no longer eliminated from the study, but form a core part of the study, thus placing experiences into the historical, political, and social context. In this way, the researcher can stay open to the world while recognizing the presuppositions.

The researcher's aim is to describe and interpret the phenomenon, to understand it better. This understanding, the fundamental form of human existence, encompasses more than knowing; it is being-in-the world and, therefore, it is not a subjective/objective endeavor, but rather, one that is intersubjective and always connected with interpreting (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Hermeneutic understanding is based on self-understanding, on uncovering the researcher's presuppositions and pre-understandings but, at the same time, seeking to understand the experience of the participants. "Thus, in terms of research, the researcher should shift back and forth, focusing on personal assumptions and then returning to looking at participants' experiences in a fresh way" (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 25). This constant shifting, interpreting parts of the experience and putting them into the context of the whole forms the hermeneutic cycle (Debesay et al., 2008) that is an inevitable part of hermeneutic phenomenology. The hermeneutic cycle was later more appropriately described as a hermeneutic spiral (Conroy, 2003), stressing that understanding is always subjective and never final.

The result of the hermeneutic phenomenological research is not knowledge about the essence of the experience, but a fusion of the old and new views which results in a new understanding of the experience from a specific perspective in a specific time and place. The goal is to come “to a place where the natural attitude is suspended; ultimately to a place of wonder” where wonder is, in the words of van Manen, a “willingness to step back and let things speak to us, a passive receptivity to let the things of the world present themselves in their own terms” (as cited in Friesen et al., 2012, p. 51). The understanding is experienced, interpreted, and conveyed through language, which is, in its essence, intrasubjective. Phenomenology, then, is “poetizing project . . . wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world” (van Manen, 1999, as cited in Friesen et al., 2012, p. 13).

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand the spiritual identity as lived and experienced by people with cognitive impairment. Hermeneutical phenomenology seems to be an appropriate approach for several reasons. First, it allows an individual to focus on experiencing the spirituality of the person with cognitive impairment as opposed to forming definitions or collecting “knowledge.” Experience does not refer so much to “accumulated evidence or knowledge as something that . . . happens to us” (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 1). Second, hermeneutical phenomenology allows for development and change by rejecting ultimate claims. Hermeneutics, in this context, means interpreting, searching for meaning where meaning “is not a thing that is final and stable, but something that is continuously open to new insights and interpretations” (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 1). Third, hermeneutical phenomenology does not isolate the essence of the phenomenon from the wider context but compels us “to ask questions

about ourselves, about the nature of the (hermeneutic) situation itself, and about who we should be and become in it” (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 2). This allows me to look at the wider context, to draw from my own experience, but also to ask questions about the meaning and the impact of the study on myself, the participants, and the readers. It is not just looking at what was but asking questions about what is and what ought to be and thus, opening the door to the future.

Role of the Researcher

In hermeneutical phenomenological research, the philosophical assumptions need to be acknowledged and discussed, including the rejection of the separation of the subjective and objective experience of reality. My identity as a special educator and a mother, as well as my spiritual identity are three areas that are the most relevant to the studied phenomenon.

A Teacher and a Mother

As a former special education teacher, I have come in contact with several people with cognitive impairment. I worked on the process of their integration, prepared individual plans, and spent endless hours in discussions and individual study sessions with them. My life as an educator and a person was significantly impacted by these interactions. I started to understand better that, with our eyes, we can see only on the outside. I saw the many injustices and abuse that these students had to endure at the hands of other students, but often also from the hands of teachers or other significant adults. I became an advocate for young people with cognitive impairment. I tried to do all I could to make their lives more bearable. However, my life-changing experience with

people who are cognitively impaired was my experience with my son, Vladko.

We took Vladko into foster care when he was twelve years old. He came to our family for a Christmas visit and quietly cried when it was time to go back to the orphanage. Thus, the next time, he returned to stay. With Vladko living in our family on a daily basis, I realized that I knew very little about people with cognitive impairment. In my relationship with Vladko, I experienced total frustration, helplessness, fear, anger, but also happiness, comfort, laughter, and love. I learned to understand body language, “read thoughts,” and always expect the unexpected. I had the privilege of observing the transformation of an individual and seeing the Holy Spirit in action in the life of a young person with cognitive impairment, my son. Vladko taught me some deep theological lessons, mainly that God is our Father. I stood beside Vladko when he gave his life to God. Therefore, I came to this study knowing that God works in the lives of all people, cognitively impaired or not. We are all His children. God does not allow differences in our human make-up to impede His understanding of and relationship with individuals. He understands. He is able to reach out and to connect.

I saw children with cognitive impairment in public schools living without God and struggling to be recognized and accepted, to survive another day, to make something of themselves with the limited resources available to them. When I compared them with Vladko who was recognized and accepted by God and his friends at church, who enjoyed life, who had unlimited resources of God’s wisdom available to aid and transform him, I had to marvel at the power of God in the life of an individual. I desired to know more about the process of this transformation, about the spiritual development of children with cognitive impairment because I realized that the primary role of the special education

teacher should be the same as the role of any other teacher—to lead students to Christ, the source of all power, wisdom, and love.

Spiritual Identity of the Researcher

I am one of those fortunate people who are led from early childhood to form opinions about ideas, worldviews, religions, and spirituality. I remember sitting in the kitchen with my parents and siblings discussing God, eternity, the meaning of life, Christianity, other cultures, and many other topics. The goal of these discussions was simple: to lead us to the arms of God. However, I am not only a child of my parents, but also a child of postmodern culture. I do not feel comfortable with boxes and classifications of any kind. Even though a person looking from the outside would probably say I am a Christian, a Seventh-day Adventist Christian to be precise, I do not identify with these classifications as much as with the fact that I am a beloved child of God. A few years ago, I would have argued about the words and meanings as an obedient child of postmodernism. I still prefer freedom to boxes and some terms over the others, but I do not mind anymore. My view of spirituality is more on the inside than on the outside. It is more in relationship with God and people than in definitions or theological concepts. It is in the face of the person who needs my love, it is in the touch of my children, it is in the pain and laughter of people I encounter, it is in the “why” of a mother of a handicapped child, it is in the “thank you” of people I encourage, it is in the bewildered but loving face of the crucified Christ.

Of course, my spirituality is definitely based on my understanding of God which is rooted in Christian theism with specific features of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. I believe that the Christian God is the Creator (Deut 4:32) who created human beings out of His immense and endless love. He created us to be His loving children. Even though we have

rebelled against God and misused His gift of freedom in our blind desire to be independent (Rom 3:23), God did not abandon us (Eph 2:4, 5). He showed us the meaning of faithfulness and love when He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to become one of us (Rom 1:1–4), to live among us, to show us the Father (John 14:8–11), and to take on Himself the punishment for our sins by being killed for our transgressions (Isa 53:5; John 3:16, 17; 1 Thess 5:9, 10).

Even though God is a mystery, and His thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa 55:8), He makes Himself known to us because of His love (Eph 1:7–9). He communicated with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:7–10), He ate food with Abraham (Gen 18:6v8), He fought with Jacob (Gen 32:24-28), He talked to Samuel (1 Sam 3:10, 11), He showed visions to Ezekiel (Ezek 1:3–5), and He walked side by side with the twelve disciples (Matt 5:1, 2; 26:36). He suffered pain on the cross (1 Pet 3:18). The Christian God is the Great I AM (Exod 3:14); in Him are hidden all the mysteries of life and eternity, but at the same time, He is God with us (Matt 1:23), our God, who brought us out of bondage (Exod 20:2). Therefore, the Christian spiritual and religious experience is not symbolized only by the visions of the prophets, but also by the feast at Cana (John 2:1), and by Jesus' desperate cry: "Why did you forsake me?" (Matt 27:46). Christian spirituality entails allowing God to be the ruler of our lives (Ps 95:3) which means that we can be in the presence of our Father all the time (Exod 33:14; Ps 16:8, 11; 139:7), we can talk to Him as to a Friend, and we can worship Him as our Creator, Savior, and King (Isa 43:15). However, at the same time, I identify with Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote: "I am not religious by nature. But I always have to be thinking of God and of Christ, and I set greater store by genuineness, life, freedom, and compassion" (as cited in Wind, 1992,

p. 153). My spirituality, a personal relationship with God, is not only shaped by “being with God” and “in God,” but is also shaped to a great degree by “hands-on” experiences with God as I have seen, heard, and touched Him in the lives of others and in my own life. I identify myself with Bonhoeffer’s (1967) “theology of doing”; he wrote in his letters from prison that

one must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith. (p. 369)

That, I think, is spirituality.

Data Collection Procedures

Apart from understanding myself as a researcher, another important feature of hermeneutic phenomenology is the data collection procedure. The quality of the conclusions does not exceed the quality of the data. Data collection, as described by Creswell (2013), is “a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p. 146). Finding “good information” requires choosing the sample carefully, gathering data through appropriate means and forms, and recoding and storing the data correctly.

Sampling

Choosing the correct people to interview is crucial in qualitative design. The people chosen need to fulfill three basic criteria: they should all have experience with the phenomenon, they should be accessible to the researcher and be willing to talk, and they should represent a range of perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I followed this advice

and used “purposeful sampling” which narrowed the sample to those who could “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156).

In order to find people who have an experience with the phenomenon being studied and who can enrich its understanding, I used several of the different purposeful sampling strategies described by Creswell (2013). I used criterion sampling that ensured that all selected cases met specific criterion defined in advance. In the case of this study, the participants were young people with cognitive impairment, men and women who attended Christian communities of faith in Slovakia.

I also used a maximum variation strategy which “documents diverse variation of individuals or sites based on specific characteristics” (Creswell, 2013, p. 158). I chose people attending different communities of faith. The causes and levels of cognitive impairment varied, creating a natural variety of the sample. I did not focus on one form or level of cognitive impairment, even though I limited the sample to those who were able to express their spiritual experiences. Although I was looking for variation, I did not focus on extreme cases. I tried to find “information-rich cases that manifest[ed] the phenomenon intensely but not extremely” (Creswell, 2013, p. 158).

Finally, I also used a snowball or chain sampling strategy which allowed me to access the participants based on the inquiries that I made in the local faith communities and recommendations that I received. I added more participants based on the recommendations of the previous participants and my further inquiries. I realized that when I used this strategy, it was necessary to be careful especially with the first cases I chose since they could color the whole research (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I also tried to

approach a range of people with requests to identify cases for my research since different people can have different recommendations. Finally, I used an opportunistic sampling strategy, followed “new leads” and “[took] advantage of the unexpected” (Creswell, 2013, p. 158). I know from experience that working with people with cognitive impairment always brings unexpected results and the researcher who wants to bring relevant and truthful information has to embrace constant change and be prepared for the unforeseen.

Qualitative researchers usually use “small sample” of participants since their aim usually is “to elucidate the particular, the specific” (Creswell, 2013, p. 157). There are several different opinions about the meaning of the expression “small sample” in phenomenological research. The recommendations vary from three to 30 participants but there have been phenomenological studies with participants ranging from just one to more than 300 (Polkinghorne, 1989; Creswell, 2013). I wanted to keep the size of the group to about three to 10 participants in order to be able to spend enough time with each participant and understand her/his experience in-depth, especially since the interviews could have taken longer than if the interviewees were with people who were not cognitively impaired. However, the exact number of the participants depended on the amount and saturation of the data collected from the participants. Saturation in this sense means “the act or result of supplying so much of something that no more is wanted” (Britannica, n.d.). The saturation of the data can be detected through careful observation and reflection upon the collected data. In general, the data collection process is usually satisfactory when specific themes start to emerge regularly and consistently in the collected data (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Gathering Data

In order to collect the data for my study, I primarily used phenomenological interviews enriched by observations and study of memos, field notes, and artwork.

The study protocol that I have developed was adjusted during the study. I gathered the data through observations of the participants in their family and other environment. I gathered field notes by observing the situation at first from an outsider and then from an insider point of view. I interviewed the participants and, if possible, I recorded the interviews on video. The interviews that allow participants to reflect on their experiences were the basic data source for my research. The interview questions were semi-structured to start the interview process and to give the participants a feeling of security, but also unstructured when appropriate, because based on my experiences as a special educator, the communication of each person with cognitive impairment is on a different level and requires a great deal of flexibility and adaptability (Charmaz, 2005). Using combined questioning styles enabled me to stay focused on the research goals and generate congruent data, but at the same time it enabled me to get in tune with the abilities of the individual participants and to capture the uniqueness of their experiences.

I enriched the data gathered through the interviews by using other means of communication, for example, artwork, mainly drawings. Artwork is often used in educating and communicating with people with cognitive impairment, and I have had multiple experiences with this means of communication. In hermeneutic phenomenology, artwork is recommended at all stages of the research, during the data collection stage, during analysis, but also when writing the results (Friesen et al., 2012). I was also sensitive to other nonverbal communication signals, or their absence, which can often tell

more than words themselves, especially with the cognitively impaired population.

Through the research, I collected memos and field notes. I kept track not only of the observations, but also mainly of the process of interpretation that evolved through the hermeneutical cycle. These notes of my inner thinking process were important in understanding my pre-understandings and presuppositions and helped to determine the fusion moment of the old and new horizons and birth of a beginning of new understanding.

Recording and Storing Data

I kept my technological tools in order. I prepared a filing system in digital form and I compiled data in such a way that it was safe and easily retrievable. All the documents such as memos, field notes, interview transcriptions, artwork, documents, and audio/video recordings were stored on electronic media and in several locations to ensure the safety of the data. In order to protect the participants, the documents were saved using an electronic security system to which only I had access. The names of the participants were replaced by pseudonyms in the transcribed documents. The list of real names and pseudonyms was stored in a different protected file. The data will be destroyed upon the completion of the study.

Prior to conducting the research, I petitioned for permission to the Andrews University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Dealing with Ethical Issues in Data Collection

The protection of people with cognitive impairment and the communities they belong to was always in the forefront of the research ethical perspective. Not everyone

who has experience with the phenomenon is willing to talk. All potential participants were given an opportunity to refuse to join the research. I explained appropriately to the participants the purpose of the study, the data collection methods, the manipulation and use of the results, and the possible benefits for the participants themselves, as well as for other people. I clarified the possible negative consequences of the research, as well. I explained my own experiences with the spirituality of people with cognitive impairment that was the basis and motivation of the research, as well as the basis of my own spirituality.

I dealt with the participants ethically, taking into consideration their well-being. I followed the example and advice of experienced researchers. I understood the dangers and vulnerability that the participants could face when consenting to be a part of the research. In the interviews, I was empathetic about the feelings and possible hurts of the participants and first carefully surveyed new areas to which the research questions might lead before asking those questions and possibly opening deep wounds with which I had no means of dealing. There might be challenges in selecting the participants and gaining their own or their legal guardians' consent. There might also have been challenges with properly observing and recording the data. I attempted to learn to be thorough and consistent. I tried to be a researcher who was able to be a good listener and who was able to be flexible and adjust to the situation.

I obtained written consent from all the participants. I asked them for permission to observe them in different settings, to take photographs, and record and conduct interviews. I also asked permission to use any other material related to the observed experience and their individual case. Even though I was dealing with young adults, the

fact that they were cognitively impaired causes them to be considered a vulnerable population. Therefore, I sought advice from the adults who were significant in their lives, mainly their parents or legal guardians. The confidentiality of the participants was and will be maintained. I also tried to ensure that the participants will benefit from the study.

Interview Process

Interviews are the basic tools used in hermeneutic phenomenology. However, they are more than a mere means of data collection. They are the means of exploring the experiences of the participants, the way of building relationships with the participants, the way of being in the world. The individual, one-on-one interview conducted with each of the participants was based on the informed consent. I made sure the participants understood that giving consent did not mean that they could not stop the interview process at any given time. I started the interviews by explaining to the participants once more the purpose of the study and the meeting. I explained my appreciation for their time and willingness to become my co-researchers. I explained that their experiences and opinions were valid, that my questions did not have only correct answers, and that they could stop me and ask for more explanations whenever they were not sure about the meaning of my question. I informed the participants that even though I would ask them several open-ended questions, the goal was to lead to a conversation similar to a conversation with a friend.

The interview protocol with several questions and explanations of the questions served to start the communication. It also formed general boundaries and structure. There were ten basic questions to facilitate the discussion:

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “God”? Can you describe God for me?

What does it mean for you to believe in God/to love God?

What do you like about God and how does it make you feel?

What do you dislike about Him and how does it make you feel?

What are some of the activities that you enjoy doing together with God and how does it make you feel?

What helps you to understand/know God better?

If you talk about God with others who do not know Him, how do you do it? How does it make you feel?

In what ways is God with you when you are outside the church?

Are you different in any way because you are God’s friend?

Is there something else that you would like to share with me regarding you and God?

I made sure that the participants felt comfortable during the interview process and that they “[left] the interview with the sense of success” (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 168). I tried to conduct the interview in such a way that it brought joy to the participants, that they felt that they understood what I was asking them, and that their answers were correct and appreciated. Even though I had a general time frame for the interview, I tried to make sure that the individual needs of the participants were met. I was flexible and divided the interview into several shorter sessions, if necessary, but I also made sure that I did not finish without proper time for “resurfacing” of the participants. Since the aim was to discover the phenomenon of lived experiences, the interviews had to be in-depth.

Therefore, I had to allow enough time for the participants to express their experiences and feelings. I tried to discern carefully what questions to ask and in what way, whether it was appropriate to use alternative communication techniques, as well as how deep I could go with each participant (Friesen et al., 2012).

The initial interview was followed up by one or more additional interviews that helped to clarify the previous communication and questions that arose from it. The participants were again asked whether they were open to those additional interviews and if they were willing to participate in them. The safety of the data storage and manipulation with the data was also used in additional interviews. The participants were approached as co-researchers of the study at all stages of the research. They were treated as equal human beings with valuable experiences and understandings. Therefore, the participants were acquainted with the data at all stages of the research, not only in data collection.

Data Analysis Procedures

Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to understand and interpret the phenomenon. Understanding the phenomenon is historically a non-cumulative, untransmittable process that “functions through the projection of possibilities”; it is being-in-the world (Kurian, 2010, p. 69). Understanding is, then, the basis for interpretation, for bringing out meaning. However, hermeneutic interpretation is not “something derived from understanding; on the contrary, interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding.” Interpretation makes “explicit one’s vague awareness of being” (Kurian, 2010, p. 73).

The interpretation of lived experiences needs to be historical since not only the understanding, but also the being “is itself historical in character” (Kurian, 2010, p. 68).

This means that interpretations need to be seen in the context of the lives of the participants, as well as in the broader socio-cultural context (Friesen et al., 2012).

Interpretation is a part of the hermeneutic spiral, a spiraling “form of interpretation shared between persons in their interactions,” and therefore, it also needs to be evaluated also in the light of the researcher’s experiences and understanding (Conroy, 2003, p. 9).

Interpretation, in fact, “is an ongoing and evolving task” which is always interactive (Conroy, 2003, p. 9).

The basic mode of interpretation is narrative descriptions of the phenomenon, the articulation of the phenomenon. “Narratives are a prime research tool that allows immediate access to the participant’s world with minimal overlay of the researcher’s language, pre-understanding and directive actions, while promoting immersion in the other person’s world” (Conroy, 2003, p. 16). Thus, interpretation is connected with language, with disclosures of the phenomenon through the written word. Interpretation is, then, the articulation of understanding that designates the meaning of the phenomenon. In the words of Kurian (2010), interpretation is becoming “aware of entities as ready-to-hand on the ground of the significance or meaningfulness presupposed in the disclosure of the world” (p. 75).

Understanding, interpretation, establishing meaning, and describing are all intertwined, inevitable parts of “dwelling alongside the other,” inevitable parts of being (Conroy, 2003, p. 17). Therefore, the data analysis already starts when choosing the research topic; in fact, it even precedes this moment and grounds its roots in existence itself. However, in hermeneutic phenomenological research, the understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon should become more intentional. Therefore, this

research was based on the hermeneutical principles of research, which are cyclical in nature, as introduced by Conroy (2003). These principles were adapted to reflect the research of the spiritual identity of people with cognitive impairment.

From Conroy's Hermeneutic Principles of Research, Adapted

- Seek understanding of the participants' spiritual world through immersion in this world.
- Make explicit the shared world of understanding between the researcher and the participants, as well as the researcher and the researched phenomenon.
- Immerse oneself in the hermeneutical research spiral; enter into active dialogue with the participants and their understanding expressed in narratives, researcher's presuppositions, pre-understanding, and a new evolving understanding of the phenomenon; as well as understanding of the phenomenon by other researchers and the wider community.
- Make explicit the immersion of the researcher in the hermeneutical spiral in a way that the reader can follow the movement of the researcher's understanding and interpretation.
- Draw out what is hidden within the narrative accounts and base the interpretation in the historical context of the participants and the researcher.
- Maintain a constantly questioning attitude in the search for misunderstandings, incomplete understandings, and deeper understanding, thus giving space to wonder.
- Move in a circular progression between the parts and the whole, what is disclosed and hidden, the world of the participant and the worlds of educators and

researchers expressing the attitude of never fully grasping, but always being able to discover new meanings.

- Engage the active participation of the participants in the whole research process, not only the interview process, but also implementation and interpretation of the phenomenon.
- Encourage self-reflection of the participants on their spirituality through participation in the research and through offering a narrative account of the researchers' understandings and interpretations.
- View every account, every narration as a valid and significant interpretation of the participant's understanding of the phenomenon based on a person's background.
- Be aware of one's own use of coping tools in any of the modes of existing.
- Keep track of movements in the hermeneutic spiral and consequent movements in understanding.
- Work together with the participants to see which points are salient.
- View interpretative (hermeneutic) phenomenology as an interpretation of the participants' interpretation.

Steps of Data Analysis

The data analysis, as was already said earlier, is an ongoing cyclical process that intentionally starts with choosing the area of the study. For the purpose of clarity, I will describe the steps of data analysis in a linear fashion even though they are, in fact, not linear, but cyclical in nature, unwinding on the hermeneutic research spiral until the merging of horizons or the paradigm shift does not occur. The steps of data analysis are

based on the steps described by Conroy (2003), Creswell (2013), Friesen et al. (2012), and Smith (2009).

Dwelling Alongside the Other and Footprint-Tracking

The first step in data analysis is dwelling alongside the participants. This dwelling is active, not passive; it is filled with observations, communication, forming relationships, and initial understandings, and then writing memos and field notes reflecting on the observed and lived. In this initial stage of the research, the interviews are transcribed, reflectively read to understand general meanings, and re-read to immerse even deeper into the texts and, through them, to dwell even closer alongside the participant. The “texts” that inform the research will not only be literary in nature, but will also include art.

Footprint Tracks of the Researcher’s Presuppositions and Pre-understanding

During this initial process, the pre-understanding and presuppositions, the old horizon, will be identified and recognized as temporal and subjective. “The possibility of interpretation presupposes the fact that there are certain aspects comprehended in advance of the actual moment of interpretation” (Kurian, 2010, p. 71). Pre-understanding and presuppositions form barriers, biases, between the researcher and the participants, between the old and new horizons. Therefore, I needed to be open to the other throughout the research while recognizing my biases and my identity as a researcher (Friesen et al., 2012).

Footprint Tracks of the Participants

The interpretation of the phenomenon as lived by the participants starts with approaching the texts at face value, reading and describing them, as well as selecting potentially important verbatim statements. At this stage, I tried to think about the general mood of the interviews (data) and the main themes which would serve as the basis for the creation of the codes. Coding could, of course, start during the data collection process; however, it would only be fully considered and finalized after the data collection. The data were divided into small sections (paragraphs/sentences) and labeled with a code (a phrase/word) that summarized the essence of the information (Creswell, 2013). The process of coding starts with preliminary codes, which evolve into the final codes as the researcher proceeds with coding more material and reading and re-reading the data. The coding process, especially the creation of preliminary codes, is accompanied by writing memos about emerging codes and themes and about the process involved in creating the codes. In this way, the researcher can gain more understanding about the phenomenon, as well as improve the codes.

Footprint Tracks of the Historical Background

An inseparable part of the first step of the hermeneutic research is also understanding and interpreting the historical context, the background of the participants, the researcher, and the wider community. By basing the research in its proper historical background, the research gains validity and depth, and its findings can be understood and applied properly. In the context of this research, the two most important wider communities that formed the background of the lived experiences of the participants were the family and the community of faith. The examination of their influence on the faith

formation of the participants was taken into consideration.

Concurrent Interpretations

Concurrent interpretations need to be ongoing during the whole research.

“Immersion in the narration necessitates keeping a running account or a ‘double internal tape’ incorporating what had been said and what was being said” (dwelling alongside the other—a description of what the researcher thought the participants were saying at the face value (Conroy, 2003, p. 21). A running account consists of memos and field notes that can help the researcher during the interview process itself, but also during the data analysis. Writing the memos and field notes is based on great observation and listening skills, but also on a questioning attitude, openness to the new. Therefore, “hermeneutic phenomenology is often ‘uncomfortable’ since it challenges taken-for-granted attitudes, as language makes these both visible and audible” (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 121).

Interpretative Questions Addressed to Participant’s Footprints

I rewrote the text relevant to the research as a narrative and, where possible, read it to the participants during a second interview. The participants were asked to clarify the parts that were unclear. The meaning of the text was enriched by other means of communication (such as art, nonverbal communication, documents). The second interview helped to fill in the gaps that were found during the transcript and reflection process (Lewis & Staehler, 2011). To help stay honest and open about the phenomenon, I continuously asked myself questions as outlined in “A Pathway for Interpretive Phenomenology” by Conroy (2003, p. 24).

In-depth Interpretation

At this stage, I synthesized the interpretation based on dwelling alongside the other, but also on questioning the face value of the texts and going beyond the texts by employing the theoretical and historical knowledge of the phenomenon in order to uncover the meaning of the experience (Smith, 2009). The in-depth interpretation led to creation of a list of codes according to the emerging themes while trying to find better, more pertinent words to describe them. This can lead to lowering the number of codes. The codes that occurred most often did not have to be the most important. Therefore, I had to check the codes not only on the basis of frequency, but also on the importance. This gave me a better idea about the significance of the codes and their possible interpretations. It also guided me in preparation for arranging the codes into sub-themes and refining them into themes. I had to sort the ideas and analyze what should be included and stressed. Of course, as a researcher, I had to be careful, at this point, not to exclude data on the basis of preference or topic. I had to maintain academic honesty and also inform the readers about any data that was paradoxical or that did not support or fit into my theory. The codes and sub-themes led to creating the “final” themes that were grouped according to their meaning and led to merging the horizons, to understanding the phenomena better (Creswell, 2013). It is important to stress the fact that the process of the data analysis, even the process of coding and identifying theme patterns, functions in a hermeneutic research spiral and, therefore, the final themes are not a result of one single, straightforward writing session.

Second Readers Introduction to the Narratives

An important part of the whole research process and especially of data analysis is

cooperation with other researchers called “spiraling outward” (Conroy, 2003, p. 30). The second readers included the chair of my dissertation committee and, at the same time, my research advisor, as well as the other committee members who cooperated with me in the whole research. I hope to find at least three people, an experienced researcher, a theologian, and a special educator or a parent/guardian of a person with cognitive impairment who was not a part of this research who was introduced to the research at the data analysis stage. I provided them with the transcripts of the interviews and the description of the methodology and asked them to read the transcripts of the data and create the codes and identify emerging themes. I compared their codes with mine and then discussed and resolved the discrepancies by choosing the codes that best captured the data. I also encouraged comments about the understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon. Incorporating second readers into my research provided verification of the research and ensured its quality (Conroy, 2003). I included the relevant comments of the participants into the research.

Paradigm Shift Identification: Merging Horizons

A paradigm shift is a change in a way of ‘seeing’ and coping with the world. It is an instance or instances where there an alternation has occurred in one’s way of understanding how to exist in the world and how to interact in the future, a ‘hermeneutic turn,’” a merging of horizons. (Conroy, 2003, p. 31)

The “hermeneutic turn” does not mean discovering the absolute truth, but coming to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon as a lived experience, thus a deeper understanding of the participants and the world. This understanding is not necessarily agreeing. It is open and constantly changing. Therefore, the reader is encouraged to become engaged in the dialogue between the participants and me that will lead to the

reader's unique understanding of the phenomenon.

Presentation of the Data to the Reader

The final step of the research analysis was the creation of the participants' stories, writing narratives, and describing the meaning of the phenomenon. To bring experience "in to language is not to change it into something else but, in articulating and developing it, to make it become itself" (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 3). This last step of the research was not simply writing what was already discovered, but it still required me to be engaged in the hermeneutic research spiral. Even though the final product might seem simple and easily readable, putting ideas, feelings, and experiences into words was a task that required my full attention. Hermeneutic phenomenologists are especially careful with finding the right words that direct "the gaze toward the regions where meaning originates, wells up, percolates through the porous membranes of past sedimentations—and then infuses us, permeates us, infects us, touches us, stirs us, exercises a formative affect" (Van Manen, 2007, p. 12) because "research which 'doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore'" (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 3).

Strategies for Validating and Evaluating the Results

Validation and evaluation of the findings, trying to ensure that the research and its findings are "able to withstand rigorous scrutiny" are inseparable parts of qualitative research (Conroy, 2003, p. 34). Qualitative researchers have developed a variety of methods such as prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of data sources, or thick descriptions to ensure that their accounts are accurate. Some of the methods are general; others are tied to specific types of qualitative research. I intend to use general validation

and evaluation methods, as well as specific methods used in hermeneutic phenomenological research.

General Qualitative Validation and Evaluation Criteria

Phenomenological research might not require a researcher to spend as much time in the field as other qualitative methods do. However, in order to understand the phenomenon correctly would require more than just performing several interviews. I needed to spend adequate time with the participants in order to understand their points of view, discover the meaning hidden behind their words and actions, understand where they were coming from, and where they were going. I spent some time with the participants to build necessary rapport. I met them several times in not-structured situations, for example, attending their youth group, a sporting event, or inviting their family for lunch. I introduced myself, built a positive relationship, and introduced my research.

I collected the data primarily through interviews. Introducing art as a way of expressing the emotions and experiences with the given (possibly painful) topic was a way that appealed to some participants better than verbal communication. Even though, I assumed that this way of communicating would help some of the participants to find words to answer some of the interview questions, none of them actually preferred this method. It appears that, for them, the topic was better conveyed through words than art. In order to validate the findings, I gained data about the same experience from different angles to ensure that I properly understood the real meaning behind the description that the participants offered.

Specific Phenomenological Validation and Evaluation Criteria

The standards for the validation and evaluation of the research were based on Creswell (2013) and his five questions assessing the quality of phenomenological research, but it went beyond his more structured approach and saw validity also as an ethical obligation that should be present through the whole research. Thus, the basic validation criterion is openness of the researcher toward the unknown, unexpected, and diverse. The first criterion described by Creswell (2013) takes into consideration the philosophical tenets of phenomenology. In this research, I clearly identified my underlying philosophical presuppositions throughout the research, as well as general presuppositions connected with hermeneutic phenomenology. The general presupposition was based on the literature research. In describing my own presuppositions, it was beneficial to ask colleagues for feedback. I considered this step to be very important since hermeneutic phenomenological research is heavily rooted in philosophy. Important for hermeneutic phenomenological research are not only participants and the researcher, but also the chair of the committee and committee members. Since their opinions and input are also part of the conversation that informs the phenomenon, they can also be seen as co-researchers; not only their opinions but also their presuppositions and pre-understandings should be taken into account. Because of a multiplicity of co-researchers, the conflicting understandings might result from the conversation. However, conflicting understandings are not to be rejected but they, in fact, are one of the validating factors of the research.

The second criterion focused on clarity of the studied phenomenon. In my research, the phenomenon was clearly defined as “spiritual identity of the people with

cognitive impairment.” I made sure to “stay with the topic” and lead the interviews and discussion toward the phenomenon without twisting or limiting what the participants had experienced.

The third criterion was connected to the procedures of the data analysis that I had described in more detail in the previous part of this dissertation. Clarity about the procedures enables a more informed dialogue between the researcher and the readers. I followed the recommended procedures. After finding and analyzing significant statements and meaning units, I provided the descriptions of the understanding of the experience. In my analysis, I took into consideration the data provided by all the participants and checked not only for similarities, but also for differences and a negative case analysis. The final result, the description of the understanding of the phenomenon, is not a presentation of the truth about the phenomenon, but rather, understanding the meaning of the phenomenon as seen by the researcher. The validity of the finding is, therefore, in the transparency of the researchers and openness to new understanding and presenting the emerging meanings to the readers in such a way that they will be able to follow and dialogue with the researcher and be changed in the process.

The fourth criterion included the need for thick descriptions of the experience to convey the understanding of the experience. I also provided descriptions explaining the context in which the experience occurred. This might require different sources of data. After depicting the understanding of the experience and its context in all its width and depth, I took it back to the participants so they could check the accuracy and credibility of my account. I was interested in the participants’ views of my understanding of their experiences, but I also wanted to find the missing pieces to be able to give voice to all

that the participants had to say about the phenomenon. The important part of writing an in-depth description of the phenomenon is building trust with the participants/co-researchers. This can be validated on the bases of the quality and depth of the collected data and openness of the participants.

The fifth criterion emphasized the need to be reflective through the study. I wrote field notes and memos and reflected on them in my study, as well as in the process of understanding the experience (the process of finding significant statements and naming/renaming and grouping/regrouping meaning units and finding the meaning behind them). In hermeneutic phenomenology, this criterion gains new meaning since the basic methodological approach is communication among the researcher, co-researchers, and the reader. The reader is distinct in time and place and cannot be in verbal communication with the researcher; thus, it is necessary to provide detailed notes of all the stages of the research process.

Conclusion

The hermeneutic phenomenological method used in this research harmonizes Heideggerian philosophy; my philosophy; the research problem, design, and analysis; as well as the results of the research. The chapter outlined individual parts of the hermeneutic phenomenological method and placed them on the hermeneutic research spiral. The described methodology, if rigorously applied, can bring valid results and even more, it can give voice to the cognitively impaired young people and help them to be heard.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand better the spirituality of selected cognitively impaired Christian young people. A hermeneutic approach was used to look at the lived experiences of the participants in regard to their faith. The phenomenon was then **described and put together** based on the participants' descriptions, as well as on my understanding and interpretation of these experiences. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven cognitively impaired young adults who attended Christian congregations of faith. All the young people lived in Slovakia at the time of the interviews. The data was analyzed by using memo writing and coding.

Description of the Participants

All of the seven participants had mild to moderate cognitive impairment. They were all able to communicate orally at a comprehensible level. All of them belonged to Christian communities of faith and considered themselves to be Christians. They were between 22 to 29 years old. Pseudonyms are used to describe each of the participants.

Peter is 22 years old and finishing high school with a focus on gardening. He loves to play games, to listen to “his” music, and to cook spicy food. Even though he is autistic with mild cognitive impairment, he enjoys talking to people. He does not look

you in the eye but he is not shy. He has strong opinions and would like the world to be a place of love and laughter. He does everything with passion. His dad is his hero. He does not remember his mom since she died when he was young. His love for God is passionate, strong, articulate, and free.

John is also autistic, but his cognitive impairment is more severe. He is 24 years old. He loves sport-car models and music. He likes people in small doses and is not very comfortable with strangers. However, he really loves God and he agreed to the interview because he wanted others to know about God. He wanted his story to be told and heard. He is thankful for his foster family and feels God's leading in His life. He is living in a community of autistic people where he is helping to take care of maintenance. He takes great pride in his work.

Simon is 29 years old. He was the oldest participant. He lives on his own and works in the kitchen as a helper. He loves people, music, sports, animals, and good food. He has a lot of friends in the church and outside the church. He loves God because He is there for him. He especially knows that God is here because he created animals.

Vierka is 22 years old. She was the youngest participant. She has multiple diagnoses and moderate intellectual impairment. She comes from a broken family. She was raised by her grandmother who also led her to believe in God. Vierka went through a hard couple of years losing her mother and grandmother within a couple of months and then spending several months in the hospital herself at the brink of death because of a really bad attack of the COVID-19 virus. She lives in the dormitory in the capital city studying to be a caregiver in the old people's home. She loves her job and knows she has a gift for understanding people. She feels God the best in the solitude of churches but she

also feels Him when helping the sick and impaired.

Maya is also 22 years old and a lover of painting and horses. She is well-spoken with mild to moderate cognitive impairment. She lives in the capital and is studying to be a cook. During weekends and holidays, she lives in a Christian orphanage. She saw a lot of abuse as a child and is very sensitive to all injustice. She questions God's goodness and His existence but, at the same time, prays to Him and thanks Him for life and everything that He is doing in her life. Her goal in life is to be good, not to be as her parents or caregivers from the orphanage. She wants to be real, not fake.

Beky is 28 with moderate to severe cognitive impairment. She is unemployed but would love to work. She loves sports, especially hockey. She loves animals and crafts. She enjoys good food and is very well versed in current affairs. She lives in an assisted living facility for people with cognitive impairment. She loves her family, namely her older sister whom she visits as often as she can. She hates suffering and often prays for others. She goes to church regularly even though she goes alone. If she misses a service, she watches it online.

Hana is 29-year-old woman with mild cognitive impairment. Hana lives in an assisted living facility. She is an artist. She is learning how to play the guitar. She loves to sing and dance. She enjoys fashion and loves to have beautiful things surrounding her. Hana is cheerful, questioning, and active. She does not hold grudges. She believes in God and would love to go to church but is ashamed to do so since she did not go there for two years because of an argument with her foster mom. She prays on her own and reads the Bible. She thinks it is important to have God in her life. She works as a manual laborer in

a factory but would like to find a job as a photographer since this was her major in high school.

Data Analysis Findings

The purpose of this study is to describe the spiritual experiences of cognitively impaired young people within the Christian communities of faith. The data analysis showed four interconnected areas within which the lived spirituality was experienced. There were several major themes identified in each of the areas.

God

God Exists

The young adults from this study saw God as the center of their Christian experience. They knew that He exists. For them, His existence did not represent a complicated philosophical issue. What others spend lifetime dissecting, they saw as clearly as day and night. God was the constant in their lives. Maya described the existence of God in this way:

There must be something that is bigger than us. It does not have to be called God. But it is somebody. He is very smart. Much smarter than we are. Everyone believes in something. There is no human being who does not believe. I believe in God. We simply must believe. And I simply feel it that way. I know that God exists.

The simple and persuasive “I know that He exists” was expressed by all but one of the participants. They were aware of different beliefs and also of those who chose not to believe in God. However, the confident and uncomplicated belief of these young people was clear. They knew God and even more than that, they knew that He is a good God. As Hana explained, “some people do not believe but I do. I have believed for a long time since I was a young girl. I know that God exists and that He is good.” Simon

described it similarly: “I can know some things. I know about people. I had people in my life, that I had to say wow, these are excellent people. And I have God like that in my life. I say wow because He is excellent.”

None of these young adults deemed it necessary to search for theological proof of God’s existence. Endless theological or philosophical discourses were not needed. They knew that God is there and that He cares. Not only that, but they also plainly understood He does not care only for them but for all people. There was no doubt in their thinking and the straightforward way they expressed their beliefs. John said with persuasion: “God is. He is good and He is love. He loves me and He loves other people. He gave His own Son. He died for us.”

Most of the young adults in this study connected the fact of God’s existence with thankfulness and help for others. They talked about their own lives and shared their difficulties. Most of them have gone through terrible heartbreaks, rejection, and abuse. They were aware of their impairments; they knew that they were different. Despite all this, they did not see themselves as disadvantaged by God. Perhaps surprisingly, they did not blame Him for their conditions. They applied this clear logic not only to them but also to people around them. When they saw the suffering of others, the existence of God was their immediate solace because they knew He is able to help. “It is necessary to believe. It is necessary because God exists. And to thank is necessary. It helps me. We should also pray for those poor people in the Ukraine. It is necessary because God exists. “It is necessary to believe,” Beky said, “because God exists.”

Looking at this, we can see that the young adults in this study were sure about the existence of God who is a positive force in their lives and in the lives of others around

them. They knew that the response to this fact was belief. It would be clearly foolish not to believe in somebody that they knew exists. There were no doubts among them about God's existence, His beneficial impact on their lives, and His goodness. Their beliefs were not based on intellectual knowledge but on faith and persuasion that "God is." Their experience of God is based on "knowing" that "God is" and that He is good.

Sustainer and Helper

The knowledge that God is good stemmed from more than just the expected desire of humans to find solace and help in the divine. The participants of this study saw God as more than just the One who is there to help. He was not just a crutch to lean on or a miracle worker who would make everything better. Even though they hope the reality of life could be different, just like everyone throughout history, this did not represent the reason for their thankfulness. In Maya's words, "the world would be so beautiful if there would be nobody cursing, judging, killing. I have friends that want to take their lives. But how can they? How can they when they did not give it to themselves. The life is from God. He gives me life every day." They saw God as the Giver of life. Simon explained: "Jesus said that he is the bread of life. It is so. He is the bread of life. He gives life to people."

It is common, and understandable, for people to come to God often because of their needs for themselves or even hopes for others. However, these young people, who have not been dealt the easiest cards in the deck of life, saw God through a different lens. In their eyes Jesus is the Creator. He brought us to life. However, He also sustains us every day. He leads us and helps us to survive. It would be difficult to express these thoughts better than in Peter's own resolute words:

Jesus is taking care. I am thankful to him for all things because we would not do anything on our own. Only with him. We are dependent upon Jesus Christ. We are hanging over a deep abyss on a thin string. And we are pulling ourselves. And Jesus is holding. He loves us. He holds us with all His strength. He will not let us fall. And that is what I admire the most about Jesus. He loves me just as I am. He loves me even if nobody loves me. He loves me just as I am.

All the participants of this study firmly believed that humans need God every day. God is not only the Creator, the First Mover, the initial power that brought us to life and granted us the very first breath. In the same way, He is present in the lives of all humans who go about their lives day after day. Without Him, nothing would be possible.

“I like God because He gives me strength when I wake up. He gave me that he helped me that I could overcome Corona. It did not have to happen. He gives me strength.” Vierka’s words could not have been more true. Every moment, every blessing in our lives is a result of pure grace. *They did not have to take place.* Simon expressed a similar belief:

God really helps in my life. I would not like to have a life without God. He gives me strength. He gives me life. I said many times to myself that I did not have to be here. And I am here. He gives me strength. Yes. It has a meaning to live with Him.

The participants of this study felt that God is active in their lives. It was an unquestionable fact. Vierka knew the following without a doubt:

I have something in life, I have God and He is with me. I do not like when people say about God that He is like this or that. That He will not give you strength. I do not like when they ask why I go to church and that it will not save me anyway. I do not like it. God is here. I know it. God is here.

God is the unmistakable power that drives us forward. He is the lighthouse guiding us forward through the tempestuous waters of life. If we go in this direction, we can reach “the next level” just as John explained:

I am thankful to God because He helps me. He charges my batteries. He prepares the path for me. It is not always easy but it is a road. It is a road that God prepared in my life and that I have to take to get to the next level.

Beky understood this in a similar way: “God helps me every day. He shows me where to go. I know it when I pray. I always thank Him that He helps me. And that I can be here. And for friends, too.” Hana also recognized God’s help in her life. She saw that He is helping others, as well.

God helped me too many times in my life, and He also helped my sisters. It was not easy, you know. We were fighting with auntie and I was ashamed to go to the church but I still wanted. I knew that God wants me. And that He wanted to be with me. But I was ashamed. You know how it was. God was still there.

Through these words and thoughts, we can see that God is the ultimate Creator and Sustainer for all these young people. He is there *for* them but He is also just *there*. They feel Him working in their lives but they also know He simply exists regardless of His deeds. Their spiritual lives can thrive because God is there for them at every moment of their lives, He leads them and shows them the way. He is not just a mystical being that exists far above, detached from the ordinary. God is someone with whom they have everyday experiences. They can feel His hand touching and guiding their lives. They are thriving through His grace.

Not Fake

There was one common theme among the majority of the participants which they felt strongly about—the fact that God is not fake. He exists and He is not playing games. He is who He says He is. The Son of God. Peter explained that “God is real. He is not a fake like some people are. They say that they are your friends but they are not. But God is real. He is not a fake.” Six of the participants used the expression “not fake” when

describing God. They felt that many of their friends and acquaintances were fake because they made promises that they did not keep. They were not there for them as they should have been. Vierka saw this in her own family:

God judges based on the heart and on what you do. As my mom. She was going to the church. I asked her why does she go. She said I just go to sit there, to listen. I just go. But then she hit me when we were home. Do you think that God forgave her everything or He does not care? He sees it. He knows everything. He is not like that, like my mom. God is not fake.

John reinforced the same idea: “If you want to know, also it is true that God is not fake. He is not fake like things are sometimes fake.” It seemed that the issue of truthfulness, of being who you say you are and keeping your promises was extremely important for the spiritual experience of these young people. They could hold on to God because He is truthful. This trait of God was as important as His love and made Him an object of adoration in their eyes. Hana underlined this in her thought:

Some people do not believe in God or they make false gods but I want what is true. I would like to go to the church as I went with auntie. I learn about God that He is true. I think everyone needs God in their lives. Everyone needs somethings like that. Because God is not false and fake.

In conclusion, it was meaningful for the participants to have God in their lives because He was not like many of the people around them who were “fake.” God is “not fake.” The young people experienced God as one who keeps His promises. He was worthy of their trust because He Himself was trustworthy. They could follow Him where He led them because they knew from experience that He would not let them down. The experience of God was unique and distinguishable from everyday life which was filled with uncertainty and heartache. On the other hand, God was always the one who kept His word and thus separated Himself from the fake world.

Friend and Savior

Yes, in the eyes of these young people, God is not fake. He is the strong and powerful Sustainer and Helper who is a real force in their lives. He is the God who leads and who is truthful. However, more than all this, they felt His presence on a more personal, intimate level—as their Friend. To them, God is Someone who is there for them just as a close friend or a relative would be, or perhaps, He is there even if those who should be are not. Peter explained,

I still love Jesus. I love Him more than friends. Even if there are no friends, there is God. He is my friend. I know that God will take care of all of us. I believe it and I know it. I know that it is like that. It is not made up.

Their perception of God as a Friend was almost surprisingly blunt and straightforward. John confidently declared, “You know what? I just want to say that God loves us.” God was John’s Friend and it meant that he loved Him. Hana went through different experiences in her life and was not currently attending church, but she still experienced God as a friend.

I do not know how do I feel about God but I would like Him to be my Friend. I know that they told me that He loves me. It is hard to imagine, but I miss it. I miss the church and that God loves me. Yes, I think it is true, you know. We are all loved by God. We all are.

In spite of their cognitive impairments, many of the participants showed that they were thinking about spiritual things and they were not just repeating words they had heard from others. Maya contemplated,

What does the sign of the cross mean to me? What does it mean? What does the word God mean? What does the word love means for me? Those are just words. Just like when I say the word leg. It is because I did not see it. Because my family was not good. My mother was a witch. She was doing black magic. But then I know that God is my friend. That means something. It means that He is my friend. He is there for me. My own mom was not there for me. I do not speak of my dad. I saw it with my

own eyes how he was hitting my mom. What does the word cross mean? But I have friends. It means friends. Yes, God is my friend.

However, there was a difference in the experience of human friendship and friendship with God. God is far above the worldly counterparts of metaphors applied to Him, far above any human friend or confidant. Nevertheless, the characteristics of the friendship still apply to Him. The experience and emotions are similar even though the subject is widely different. Vierka could clearly feel these thoughts and summed them up in the following words:

I have some friends but not at home. God is not a friend. He is like ... God is God. He is different. You cannot say that He is a friend because He lives forever. He can see everything and He is powerful. Almighty. But also he loves people. So I guess He is a friend. Yes, God is a friend but different. He is God.

God can never be an “ordinary” friend because His care for us already surpassed all others before we were even born. In Jesus, He gave His life for us and for these young people as well. They were aware that His selfless sacrifice made Him a worthy friend because friends are selflessly there for others. He is more than their human friends, because He not only stood by them, but also died for them. They experienced Jesus as their personal Savior. He is not akin to other gods, humans, or entities. His sacrifice on the cross forever changed His stance in our lives. The depth of His love can never be achieved by anyone or anything else. John’s explanation details these feelings:

It is like this. We are all sinners. We were born into sin. Our souls are black. We have it from Adam and Eve since they sinned for the first time. They ate the apple from the tree. They did not obey God’s command. Jesus with His death washed away this sin. Jesus died and He is still pleading for us. It is in a way that Jesus died for us and God loved us so much that He gave His son. I do not know what I would do if they would take my son and put him on a cross. I would send lightning and storm at them. However, God loves us so much, that He saw that we are doing bad to His son but He left it be. And Jesus said do not count it against them. ... It is very interesting that God is like this. That He loves us so much. Allah or Buddha, they are not like that.

They do not love us so much that they would give their son. God is mysterious. Mystical. I love things like that, mystical things.

Even though Beky expressed herself in a much shorter way, she was just as sure about the experience of God as a Savior. The essence of these thoughts in her words was clear: “You know, God has a Son. Jesus. He is God too and He died for us. He loves us. He also loves those who are poor and sick.”

All these expressions of the young people with cognitive impairment from this study present a clear experience of God as a personal friend. They know that God is their friend because He loves them. They can actively feel His love in their lives. These young people know that God is a special type of friend, one who is always there for them. He is a Friend who died to save them, who rose above all worldly counterparts. Through this selfless act, we can be forever sure He is our friend—just as sure as the participants of this study. He is mysterious and we might not understand everything about Him, but His sacrifice proved once and for all His never-ending love for us. He truly is the worthy Friend.

Good and Evil and Free Will

In spite of all the strong and sure perceptions of God in their lives, these young people also experienced a different side of life on earth. Even though they might be cognitively impaired, this did not blind them to the realities of life and it also did not cause them to perceive God through a two dimensional lens. All of them experienced rejection; many are from broken families or have been part of the foster care system. Their souls are forever bruised and the world does not always make sense to them. It is not the easiest place to live in. Maya asked, “Do you believe in God? Do you believe? I

sometimes feel that in the fight between the good and the evil, that the evil is bigger than the good.” A powerful statement that was followed by the same thought as most of the others: “I sometimes think that if there is God, if He really exists and if he is so nice to us, if he is so nice to me, why he is letting this happen? Why do parents behave like that?”

The spiritual lives of these people are not always happy and simple. They also struggle with the questions of good and evil and they question the goodness of God and His intentions. Most of the participants have lost a loved one and it is hard for them to understand why God allows pain. Vierka acknowledged her questions in the following words:

I pray to God but I do not know if he is really good. Maybe I will know Him only when I will be with Him up there. I believe in God, but I am also angry. He took close people. Mom died in November and grandmother four months later. So what. Grandmother died because of blood poisoning. I do not like that God takes people. Young people, people with cancer and adults with cancer. But mostly, that He is taking them. It is good, that He will not let them suffer when something happens to them, but He leaves the family there. Sad.

All of the participants were deeply touched by the war in Ukraine. They still believe in God, but they have questions. They do not understand why it is happening. They pray, they trust, they know that God is love but, at the same time, they ask why. They wonder and question God’s intentions. Simon, just like all the others, asked one of the ultimate theological questions:

Why do bad things happen to innocent people? Because of Ukraine I cannot sing. When you see those people on the train station. I was coming back on Sunday and there was a small boy, like four years old, with Ukrainian flag. He was crying. He was terribly crying. It was breaking my heart. And so I was thinking why does God let it happen? Why did He let it be? Can God sing now? I cannot sing.

The pain caused Simon to lose his voice. He cannot sing anymore. And if he can’t

sing, he wanted to know, can God? The situation in the world made Peter angry. All he wanted was to stop people from doing bad things. Even though his reaction was different, the underlying question was the same. Why is God waiting so long? Why is He not doing something?

God stopped me. I wanted to be bad. I wanted to hit people. To destroy them. They were not nice. They made things that I do not like. I feel bad then. Like when I need to have a respirator. It is not good. It feels bad. I thought that I do not want to live. But God stopped me. I felt it. I said to Him, please, stop them finally. And the war. Make an omelet out of this mess. You are a chef. Join in. You dealt with Sodom and Gomora. You made an omelet then or whatever you did. Also now do it. Sort this mess out. But God is taking His time. I do not know why.

All the participants expressed questions and doubts about God. They even felt similarly to the Psalmist that God has forsaken them, that He stopped speaking to them.

Maya said,

I do not know. I am not angry. I am not angry at God. There is no way for me to be angry with him. It is not that I do not care about God but I sometimes feel that he does not care about me. That he forgets me.

In spite of this uncertainty, later on they all agreed that they knew God loves them and walks with them even in the tough times. Peter phrased it like this:

I sometimes feel that God is quiet. He is quiet. But His day will come. He will talk and He will do it. I know it. I know because He promised that He will do it. He always keeps His promises. He promised to lead us even through the valley of the shadow of death. We do not have to fear evil. I know God is with me always. He is always with me.

Even though it was not an interview question, it was important for the participants to express that they chose God on their own. It was their decision to turn to Him. They were introduced to God by other people but they decided to follow Him because of their own free will. John confessed,

You know, I have accepted God because of my parents. I have accepted God and could see Him in the clouds. It was perhaps just an illusion but perhaps God wanted

to show me something. He plays an important role in my life ever since. I have decided to follow Him.

Vierka, like the others, has also seen the importance of choosing God on her own:

I think that you need to know that you want God. I want Him. They do not tell me to go to church. But I go. They do not tell me to pray. But I pray. Also my grandmother was praying and she went to church.

These young people are cognitively impaired and often cannot make all the decisions that most other young adults can. However, it is still vitally important for them to have a choice. They want to choose freely if and how they experience God. Maya described her experience which was very similar to the experiences of others:

We had to go several times a day. To church. In the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening. We had to pray before lunch and then when we finished our meal. Then there was the rosary. When you went for supper, when they called you, you had to pray before supper and after supper. And then there still was a small worship. It was called a crown. I did not like it. I did not like that they forced us. I did not like it because they did not say why. I did not understand why to do it. I did not have a choice to pray or not to pray. I did not have a choice to go to the chapel. I was raised like that, in panels. I could not decide for myself. Even now. It is hard. I am 22 years old. But I do not want to be bad. They do not force me in Bratislava. Now I go. I go to the church on my own. I do not pray there. But I pray here. At home. I pray on my own.

From all these earnest questions we can see that the young people with cognitive impairment in this study struggle in their spiritual lives with the questions of good and evil just like the rest of us. They experience pain in their lives, they see the suffering of the people around them and they wonder why God is allowing that. However, this experience does not deter them from their relationship with God. They simply ask questions, but their belief is stronger than their doubts or their need to have answers. Their belief in God's existence and goodness and trust in His plan sustain their spiritual lives in spite of the reality of our crumbling world. They are choosing God freely because they want to follow Him, not because they are pushed or forced. Experiencing the

complexities of life with the rest of us might sometimes make them *unable to sing*, but they still trust in God, their unwavering Friend, to *make an omelet* out of this mess. This is their own free decision.

God in the Family and Early Childhood

Belief in God for the young people who participated in this study is something that they witness early in their lives, in their families, or through significant adults they have encountered. When asked who introduced God into their lives, six of the participants said that they had been led to God by their parents or grandparents.

“We went to church with my parents. We have stopped when they got sick, but I still go,” said Beky. John remembered that he learned about God from his mom. “Jesus Christ is in my life. I got to know Him through my parents.” Simon similarly acknowledged that, at home, they “had this picture of Jesus on the wall. He was smiling. My mom would talk to me about Him. I remember the picture.” Peter said, “My dad told me about God. We talk about God every day. We also sing and pray. Because my dad is not fake. He really believes. Not like pharisees.” Vierka had a grandmother who led her to Christ. “I went to the church every Sunday. My grandma taught me that. At first I went to the church because of my family. But then because I liked it. I liked to listen about Jesus. He is my friend.” Hana also mentioned knowing God since childhood:

I was used to something. It is something from childhood. I was used to go to church. We went with auntie. You know. I did not like it at the time but since I came here (*assisted living facility*), I am saying to myself that I can thank God, that the auntie took me from the orphanage and talked to me about God. She was pulling me towards Him. I did not understand it like that at the time. Yes, she was different generation. I wanted to choose by myself. But now I am thankful.

The families not only introduced them to Christ and to the church, but also taught them ways to experience God and spirituality. John described his experience in the family in the following words:

It is the basis that I had. That we were singing before meals and we always prayed. We prayed before lunch. We simply prayed also after lunch around five. We have worship. We pray to God to be merciful. We prayed with my parents also in the evening. That is the basis. That's why I know that God is up there in heavens.

Others also remember family worship, singing songs, and praying and consider them an important part of their experience of God. Peter recalled, "We end Sabbath with my dad. He reads something or I read. We also start Sabbath on Friday. We sing together. And we talk, you know, we just talk about life how it is and about God." Vierka remembered similar childhood memories: "I like to sing and pray just like I did with my parents because it is really important for you. And it helps."

The families helped most of the participants to learn to distinguish between right and wrong and to make decisions based on their beliefs. Simon echoed these sentiments:

I want to be good. I want to do good things and make good decisions. I want to do what the Bible says. My mom always read with us in the evenings. She talked about the Bible. It says what is good and what is bad. You can know when you read the Bible. Sometimes I do not want to read. It is when I want to do what I want but then I read it. I want to be better.

Even though Maya was the only one who did not have any Christian experience from her childhood, she still had important adults in her life who led her to God. She said,

They read from the Bible, stories and how you should be. What we should do. But they did not do it. You know. I have seen it with my own eyes. They read it but they did not do it. But then in Bratislava, the nun, she read the Bible and took us to a chapel. She was a very nice person. She is. I thought what I could say about her. She is like an angel.

The early spiritual experiences that shaped the lives of these young adults are something they still remember and consider important. They are not always able to

replicate or do everything that they were taught. However, they still cherish these moments with God and would like to keep them as an active part of their lives. Simon fondly reminisced,

I still remember the evenings with grandma. We would be together and we would sing and pray. She would play on the piano. And we would talk a lot. I did not say much but I like to listen. And I miss it. I sometimes sing those songs. You see, I have them here. And I sometimes read the Bible like she did.

Simon's memories were mirrored in Vierka's voice as she explained,

Even now I sometimes feel my grandmother present. Maybe it is a gift. I feel her because I remember how we were praying together, to Mary, and to Jesus. I cannot sing very well but my grandmother could. She could sing from the songbook. I can feel her presence when I pray. And I know that God is there.

These memories, shared among all the participants, present a similar formation of their spirituality mainly in their early years through families or examples of other important adults. The families of these young adults instilled in them the essential knowledge of God, how to learn more about Him from His Word, and how to worship Him through prayer and songs. These early experiences unmistakably shaped their faith and created strong foundational memories that they cherish and strive to imitate even in their adult lives.

The Importance of Church Community

The human race gathered in communities since "the dawn of time," and people throughout history needed and sought out relationships with others not only to survive, but also to thrive. The young people interviewed for this study naturally understood this basic human need, as well. Their experience of spirituality was also intertwined with people of faith outside of their family. Maya, whose family was not Christian, explained the need for others outside of the family circle:

You know, I am not a person to be sad about. I am not like that. People do not have to be sorry for me. I have good life because I try hard. Because God helps me. Because I have people who help me in the community. In the church. They helped me a lot. I feel that I owe them a lot. I think God gave them into my life.

Later in the interview she contemplated these thoughts further, saying,

I am a feminist. I am independent. I am not a person who needs help. I am like that since childhood. I experienced bad things. I do not feel the need to have people next to me. But I want to find people who are real people. Who are not looking just if you are pretty. And rich. And looking at internet and money. But it is a miracle to meet person like that. But I have met few people like that. In the church. The nun here in Bratislava was like that. That's why I believe. Also the director of the school. He was a real person. I am thankful to them for a lot. But nuns in the orphanage they were different. They were just wringing their hands. Just wringing hands. But they were; they taught me that I do not want to be like them. I still believe in God but I do not go to their church. They ask me. And they want me to go. But I do not go there. But I go when I am alone.

Church community was also important for Vierka. She said, "I went to church regularly. I go. I had family in the church, my cousins, my grandmother, my neighbors. And some people also went every day to church. I go on Saturdays." Beky lives on her own in an assisted living facility. Her family lives in a different city. However, she still goes to church.

I go to the church alone because I want to go there every Monday. I do not go on the weekend because there are too many people there. On Mondays it is good for me. There are not so many people and I know them. And they know me. They would say hello and talk. Sometimes. And sometimes I go also during the week. I go to a small yellow church. You know. Not the big one close by. It is not for me.

However, not all the participants had the same experience with Christian community. Hana saw church a little differently as she explained:

I did not have friends in the church. I was alone. In the corner. I did not have young people there, or maybe I was too different then. Maybe, if I go there now, if I would find courage, I would find friends. But I talked to some people there. Like older. They were nice to me and I miss it. They asked me how I am and so.

Peter also felt that the older people in the church understood him more.

I did not go to the youth group in the church. They did not want me. One girl talked to me once. We talked as friends. But I have not seen her for a year. But the best were the old people. I understood them the best. It happened like this in my life, that I had the older people, but I also understood the young, but they did not want me. I wanted them but they did not want me. But I did not give up on Jesus Christ even though they were like that. I love Jesus more than friends.

On the other hand, John remembered his church as a place where he was accepted. He is currently unable to attend church regularly due to the COVID-19 virus, but he fondly recalls his time within the church community:

I went to a community. I was going there with my parents. I was younger. In that community where I went, they were always happy to see me. Even when I am handicapped. I always had a place there. They did not see me as a handicapped boy, but a boy who is interested in faith and who is friendly. I am thankful to God for that community. Here, where I am now, I miss God a lot. Here people do not believe but I do believe. Maybe I will go back to Bratislava to that community. Maybe. But this is my path from God, I am here now. I need to walk down this path.

As important as friendship and community were to each of the interviewees, they were not the only reasons to attend church. Going there also meant learning about God, listening to the Word of God, and worshipping Him. John talked about his experience of worshipping in community: "I pray there. I sing and worship. In the church. I like to sing with other people and praise God." Simon had fond memories of his time in the church:

It is not very good now when we cannot go to church. I do not like to watch it online. I do not do it. But I still remember the songs. You know that I like to sing. I like especially those worship songs for the young people. I like to sing with the youth group before the sermon. And I like also special music when they sing solo. When they sing nice and the words are nice you feel it."

Despite being cognitively impaired, these young people enjoyed listening to the sermons and learning more about God. John said,

I always go for the sermons. They are the best. But not all the pastors know how to preach. Mark is the best. I gave him the golden medal twice. But sometimes I am bored. Those are boring sermons. I fall asleep in ten minutes, but when they get iron medal, I can listen to them even for 30 minutes. And the gold, I can just listen to it. Because it is from the Bible and it is from life. It is not a tape. It is not a broken

record. And so I advised the pastors to have sermons that are living. I told them that. But I did not go to the Sabbath school. Rarely. Perhaps twice or three times. I answered the questions correctly and I understood everything but I did not enjoy it. I already knew everything. There was no life. It was boring. It is better to read from the Bible. I do that.

John also enjoyed listening to the sermons.

We have a priest now. He is evangelical. He comes here once or twice a week. He has the homily and gives the sacraments. I enjoy listening to him. He is talking about Jesus and often he says that God loves us. He also talks about how Jesus died for our sins. And other stories from the Bible. I always go when he comes.

Maya felt that the sermons were not just telling the stories, but also helping her to find answers to questions of faith:

I am not sure why there is evil. Can you tell me how it is with free will? What do you think? Is there such a thing as free will? Can you just do what you want? Also, how was the world created. How was it? The scientists say something different about the Big Bang. And sometimes the priests talk about it. I like to listen to the sermons. They always say something that you can think about. And there are things you can learn.

It was also important for some of the participants to know that they had a special place in the church. John said,

There was a priest, when I was in the church, and he said something that touched me. I had to speak up about it. I told the truth. I would say a prophetic sentence and the priest would talk about me in his homily. He would say that I have a gift. That I want to see God and that I am spiritual. He would say that I have a spiritual life. I was like, well he would say, I was like a prophet.

Peter, like John, is autistic. Even though he would not maintain eye contact with you, he is very sensitive to what people do or say. John is quite expressive with an obvious ability to perceive and express the truth that others might not want to see. At one point during the interview, he talked about his church experience in this way:

God says that if we are not the salt of the Earth, if we do not have taste, we are useless. I do not want to be useless. I see things and what I think is important I use. I say it. I have made myself into a mini-pastor. Some say I am like a prophet. I do not preach behind the pulpit but I was talking. I was saying what God gave into my heart.

I was talking in the church. I cannot speak behind the pulpit, because they did not ask me. You cannot do what God does not ask. You cannot do anything without Him. So I was just talking but with feelings and with salt. Because pizza needs to have salt.

The experience of spirituality within the community of faith was limited during the last year and a half due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Even though this was not part of the interview, all the participants explained their concerns with the situation. They felt that it negatively influenced their spiritual lives.

It was very nice to go to the church community. I am missing it but at the same time I believe, that after COVID it would be good. I believe, that this COVID will end once and everything will return to where it was before. In D. we form a community. But it is not easy to form a community during COVID. And also there is a problem that this community is without God. He is missing. I am sad about it. I miss community with God. I miss it terribly.

John expressed a fervent dislike for the current situation:

I hate it. I want to shoot at it with fire. I want to burn it down. I hate that we cannot go to the church. It is not like it was. These online sermons, I do not do it. I do not listen to it. I just sit with my dad but I read the Bible to myself. Or I sing in another room. I hate this online thing. But I want to remember good things and to put bad thing way. Because who would like to enjoy evil? Nobody. My teacher says that we should enjoy life when we have it. Because we can lose it. But I do not enjoy COVID. I try to enjoy life but going to church that was better.

Vierka, who had suffered from COVID-19 once before, was aware of the dangers. She missed the community, but at the moment, only went to church when no one was there.

That corona. A person can be scared. I got sick. People cough next to me and I am scared. I am stressed. Corona influences it, it made me stop. I do not go to church now. Sometimes I go when I am alone. To the chapel. But sometimes I stay at home. And I look at the church through internet. And once the priest came to visit. He even brought a candle. It was really good because we prayed and I got strength.

Beky had similar feelings:

I am still angry. At everything. You cannot accept it (COVID-19), you just learn to live with it. You have to be masked. And you cannot go anywhere. You cannot go to

church. I tried to watch online but it is not good. I do not do it very often. They sometimes turn it on and call us but I rarely go. I wish we could go to church.

The importance of the church community for all the participants was unmistakable. Their experience might have differed, but the outcome was the same—they all expressed the need for church. Whether it was for the human relationships or for the much-needed communion with God, they all, at one time or another, found refuge in the church. Through the lens of the pandemic going on at the time of the interview, their feelings were even more palpable. They all made it very clear that experiencing God without community was not right and no technological substitute could truly fill the primal void. The shared experience was simply an essential part of their faith just as it is an essential part for all of us. It is the *salt on our pizza*.

Personal Connection with God

Prayer

Throughout all the interviews, the participants, either directly or through another context, expressed the fact that God took first place in their lives. They understood that they are sinful human beings who have clear limitations. Peter said, “I pray. I sometimes sin and sometimes say bad words, but I still have God in front of me and even if I sometimes do my things, God is still on the first place.”

In spite of the fact that life with God was not always easy, these young people chose God and they knew that He was there for them. He is a close and personal God that directly influences their daily lives. Simon expressed,

I am thankful to God for everything. I tell him that. It is not always easy and some people are difficult. I sometimes complain but I always think about God. I am able to make it work. I will see what the future will hold, but God is always there.

To be with God, as Vierka claimed, is a conscious choice:

I think that you need to know that you want God. I want Him. They do not tell me to go to the church. But I go. They do not tell me to pray. But I pray. Also, my grandmother was praying and she went to church.

Faith cannot be just an assortment of words and doctrines. It requires our personal and active input; otherwise, it becomes just a philosophical construct. The young people in this study understood this notion and knew that if God was real, then they had a role in the relationship, as well, just as they would have with their friends or family. One of those practical expressions in their lives was prayer.

Prayer for them was an important connection that opened a channel to God every day. Communication with God through prayer was viewed as something that gave strength. As he always did throughout the interview, Peter explained prayer with a poignant metaphor:

You know how it is. It is never an easy in life. The things are not easy. It is simply difficult. But when you have God with you, God gives you strength. It is as if your batteries are not charged on your phone. You want to charge them. So God is the electricity that will charge your batteries. I know that there is somebody up there. And I pray to Him and He listens.

Hanka also saw the importance of prayer: “I learnt from the auntie how to pray and that it is important. I pray every day and I feel that my day is better. I pray to God.”

Prayer was not a spiritual discipline that these young people practiced only for their own self-gain. They prayed also for the benefit of others. Vierka said,

I pray every day. I pray so that God will help. I cannot even sleep because of the people in the Ukraine. When I see them I am sad. I pray to God to help them. And I pray for everyone and for this world.

Vierka experienced God working in her life and answering her earnest prayers. Prayer is not just something we do because of tradition. It is not just a superstition. These young

people viewed prayer as something that really works. Vierka described her experience with prayer further:

You know when I was in the hospital I prayed to God. There were also priests visiting and they said that you will not live through it, you will not be long with us. They thought I am dying. They wanted to give me the last anointing. I was there for one month. But I prayed. I said to God that I am a young person. What if I die? But there was one chaplain and he came to me. He played cards with me and we prayed. He believed I can pull through it. He came every day. And God made me well.

Like most of the other participants, Vierka had a concrete experience with God's answering prayers. She believes that "it is important to pray every day. I pray in the morning and in the evening." For the young people in this study, prayer was clearly the natural expression of their relationship with God just like talks are natural expressions of their relationship with family and friends. Even though they learned to pray from their family members, prayer became an indispensable part of their daily lives. As with many other topics, current issues in the world like COVID-19 and the conflict in Ukraine made their feelings even stronger. The natural reaction to these issues for many of the participants was running to God through prayer. Prayer was the ultimate way to seek out safety and peace in the tempestuous waters of the world.

Reading the Bible and Communing with God

Another practical expression, through which the young people who participated in this study strengthened their relationship with God was His Word. Just like countless people throughout history, they, too, found solace and a safe harbor in the calming thoughts sowed in the pages of the Bible. Peter said, "I read the Bible. I read a picture Bible and the real Bible. But I have not read for a long time. Because of this mess. Because of COVID. It is not good for reading." Even though the current situation brought

distress for Peter and also influenced his spiritual life, he still considered it important to mention reading the Bible. It was an important and essential part of his spiritual life.

Even though Maya read the Bible only sometimes and not as part of her daily routine, she felt that she should do it:

You know that it is perhaps stupid, but I can always hear it in my ears, you know, I can hear that I should read the Bible. I read it sometimes. And sometimes I listen to the nun. But I have it in my ears that I should read it.

The fast and relentless era of the 21st century often makes us forget the importance of still life. This is often translated to our relationship with God, as well. People often try to find more and more activities to strengthen the divine bond. However, one of the essential and primal ways to connect is often forgotten in the bustle and hustle, but it was not lost on the young people who were interviewed. They also sought God through solitude. As mentioned before, they experienced Him among other things, but it was also important for them to experience God through solitude. Vierka emphasized this when she mentioned,

I like to go to the church alone. It feels strange. You know, good. I go to the cathedral by the castle. Do you know it? It is big. And I go when I am alone there. I sit and listen. And I sometimes pray. But I often just sit.

Simon also perceived God's presence in solitude and talked to Him when he was alone:

“When I am alone with God, I thank Him for everything and I also ask Him for help. I also ask for forgiveness when I am there alone with Him.”

Finding time to read the Bible, to hear God speak and to let Him speak in the silent moments of everyday life were all important attributes of these young people's daily lives with God. Even if they did not form part of their daily routine, they still considered them essential and understood them as such.

Growth in Christ

2 Peter 3 tells us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” The people with cognitive impairment in this study acknowledged the need for “growing in Christ.” They saw that they needed to grow into the image of Christ.

John said,

It is that God is changing your life. It is, that I have problem sometimes problem to forgive. It is that when I am angry with a person, then I will say that I am not talking to you. I had a client like that today. I had a problem with her. But then God told me, He reminded me, that Christians know how to forgive. And so I have forgiven her. I am upset, but I have forgiven her. You know, when you are upset and you forgive, God can see it. It is like taking a step up.

Peter understood that spiritual growth is reflected through our actions and that it is an ongoing process, a journey with God:

I cannot say that I do not have any sins. But I always ask for forgiveness. I ask God to work in my heart and to make me better. To make me the salt of the Earth so I can play the game well. To get to the next level. To play with passion. That is how I want to live my life.

Peter later added, “I want to hold on to that what is good. I do not want to think about bad things. I want to be better.” His words show that he discerned between good and bad and wanted to hold on to what was good.

For John, it was obvious that life with God would be manifested in his behavior:

Yesterday I went to visit the social worker who lives upstairs. We should not go there. Nobody goes. But they allow me to go because they can trust me. They know I believe in God and so they can trust me.

God was considered as a source of wisdom and help in the everyday problems of the people with cognitive impairment. John expressed his need for God in everyday decisions:

You know, when I was choosing what to study and what to become I wanted to be a sales assistant. I wanted to make money. But we prayed with my mom. We prayed a lot and God showed me, that I have a gift to help people. And so I became an assistant taking care of people. That is connected with God. We were asking God how to decide. I am not sorry for my decision. God had a plan with me and I want to follow that plan.

Maya felt that knowing God and wanting to have a relationship with Him made her different than others and gave her purpose in life. She said,

You know, I think a lot about I think how come I am so different than my family. I have so many questions. I am thinking a lot. I am a dreamer. I try. I try hard. If it does not go one way, I try another. I try to be a good person. If it will not go this way, it will go that way. I am not like a sheep that is following everyone. I am standing out. I am different. I want to be good. I want to be really different. I want to be myself. I think God likes it. He likes that I want to be good. And different. Sometimes it is not easy when you are different. You want to belong but then you realize there is no choice. I want to be proud of myself. I want God to be proud. And my mom. Yes, my mom, too. I always knew what I wanted. I knew if since I was a kid. I wanted to be a better person. I wanted my mother and father to be proud of me. That will not happen. But the most important thing is that I am proud of myself and God is proud of me.

Like many others in this study, Maya expressed the desire “to be better.” She said,

It will work out. I will try very hard and it will work out. I am not causing any problems. I always try to be good. I pray to God to help me to become better. And then in the kitchen they praise me that I am very skillful and that they can see that I want to learn.

Some of the people I this study with cognitive impairment had very complicated family lives, but they, too, expressed the desire to reflect God in their daily lives even if the reality of their lives was difficult. Vierka described her experience in this way:

Sometimes, when it is bad with my dad, you know I have to cook lunch to be ready exactly at noon. Or he would beat me. Sometimes when it is bad, I think that Jesus can take me. Because of the beating. But Jesus does not take me. He gives me strength. We cannot change who are parents are. Nobody can do it. We cannot change how we were born. I have DMO. I was born like that. But God is with me. He can help and he wants me to be better.

Hana said,

I do not show it. Even here with the social workers I do not show it but I am sometimes angry. I am upset. But I do not say it. I do not like sometimes when they

tell me what to do and that I should do things differently. I just say to myself that they are right. They want the best for me. God gave me strength not to be so upset and want to be better.

The people with cognitive impairment in this study demonstrated a deep understanding of the importance of spiritual growth and a desire to reflect God in their daily lives. They acknowledged their own flaws and sins, but also recognized the transformative power of God's grace and forgiveness. For them, knowing God gave them purpose, strength, and a sense of being different in a positive way. Despite the difficulties they faced in their family lives and personal struggles, they sought to be better and to hold on to what was good. Their stories serve as a testament to the transformative power of faith and the ongoing journey of growth with God.

Talk about God to Others and Help Them

Jesus's final commandment to His disciples before His ascension, as stated in Matt 28, entailed the obligation to spread the gospel to all nations and instruct them to obey His teachings. This mandate, therefore, implores us not only to spread the good news of Jesus's life as written in the Scriptures but also to express how Jesus continues to exist within and alongside us. The gospel undoubtedly stands as the most exceptional story ever told. When we care about others, we share great things that happen to us that might also help them. Jesus loves them just as Jesus loves us. In John 15:12, Jesus commanded us to love each other as Jesus has loved us. While we can never match the perfect, unconditional love that Jesus has for us, we are called to strive to do so continually. We pray for our friends, family, enemies, and for those we do not even know. We give of our time, talents, and resources to help those in need. We genuinely want other people to have a fulfilling life and do whatever we can to help bring about that

love. People with cognitive impairment also felt the need to share the good news of Jesus and show them how God can help in their everyday lives.

John was sharing His love of God through songs:

I am sad when some people do not know God. I am trying to bring a little bit of God's breath into every situation. That's why I also sing together with my friends and I sing to others, too. Father, almighty God, open your giving hands, come and sit with us, we will be here together. That is what I do. I talk about God and sing.

Peter was trying to talk about His relationship with God with people around him.

I am not a pastor but I talk to others about God. I am telling them what God gives into my heart. I am talking about Jesus to my friends. They also sometimes accept something and sometimes they do not understand. It depends. But I tell them. I am talking about God also with my assistant. He is an evangelical Christian. He says that. But he goes to the church only for Christ

mas. He is not a real Christian. And he always ask about creation. How could it happen. But I tell him that it is not important. It is important to believe in God. As I said already, your life must have salt. When you do not believe it is without salt.

Vierka felt God's calling to help those in need:

I have this gift to help people. A special gift from God. I can understand when they are sad. I feel them. I help those who are close to me. Also in the dormitory. I help them. I am also helping the clients. They cannot sit. I need to feed them. It can be hard especially when they are heavy or when they are not cooperating. But I know how it is. When you cannot feed yourself. I was like that in the hospital. And I was ashamed. But God gave me this experience so I can now better understand the clients and to be patient with them. Because it is not always easy.

John similarly felt God's gift to sense people's needs and to be able to encourage them;

When I was a child, I was not always good. I was not a good child. But my parents loved me and prayed for me. Now I am an adult. I know what to do. When I see some people sad, I go to them and empower them spiritually. God is always in me and I can sense spiritual things. I sometimes can say the right words that encourage others. I always try to help others. I bless people and wish them good when there is a good moment for that. I try to represent God, because He gave me everything. I am not ashamed. He gave me everything and I will not be ashamed of Him.

John also shared a concrete experience of being God's hand in the life of his friend:

I had a friend before. He was also autistic. But he was not nice to me. He was very negative. But God showed me not to give up. I went to Him after some time and we talked. We explained things. He also apologized than. He was sad how he behaved. I think that it was God's work. I listened to God. He showed me that my friend is only sad because they were taking away the old city busses. He really likes city busses. He was used to them. He liked them and that made him sad. And negative. But God told me to wait.

The sense of having a spiritual gift to help others was common to all the participants. Some felt uncertain talking about it, and it seemed that they had not always had positive reactions when claiming this gift. Simon described it like this:

You know, maybe it sounds stupid and some people do not like it, but I have this feeling that I understand people when they are sad. I understand them. I can feel it. Maybe it is my job from God to help, to help people to be better when they are sad.

Beky felt that even if people did not always respond positively, she should help.

This help could also involve sacrifice:

A person cannot even know what people would do. What would they do in this world. They will say all is good and then again something bad comes. Or they are bad to you. But you know, we need to sacrifice ourselves and help. I said that already. I went to a concert to help people of Ukraine. I also pray for them. And I want to help.

The need to help others always was a thread that could be found in all the interviews. Maya said,

I always try to help others. When the person needs help, when he needs me to listen to him, or anything else, I do not know what now, but anything else, I always come and help. I cannot say no. Even when it is a hard situation, I always try to solve the problem and show to that person that there is also another way and ... another road. So I am like that. I help a lot. I give a helping hand.

She also said, "I sometimes feel that the person that has a little can give a lot. Can give more. Like me. I can give a lot."

The cognitively impaired people who were interviewed understood that talking about God to others and helping them is an essential part of being a Christian. They felt the need to share the good news of Jesus and show others how God can help in their everyday lives. The feeling of a spiritual gift of helping others was a common thread. While some may feel uncertain about talking about this gift, the need to help others is still a significant part of their lives. Sacrifice and prayer are also integral parts of helping others. Thus, for these cognitively impaired people, it was important to strive continually to show love and compassion to others, just as Jesus did. Peter said: “You cannot do anything without God.”

Maya added: You know, everyone imagines faith differently. Everyone takes it differently. And we should tolerate it.”

In summary, this study found that young adults with cognitive impairments held a strong spiritual identity wherein spirituality played a vital role in their lives. Their understanding of God was not just limited to acknowledging His existence but also extended to viewing Him as a Sustainer, Helper, and Friend. Despite the absence of philosophical or theological language, they were aware of the concept of good and evil, thus recognizing the need for a Savior. They perceived God’s presence in their daily lives.

These individuals were primarily introduced to God by their families who instilled the importance of church attendance and spiritual practices such as prayer and Bible reading. Despite some negative experiences with faith communities, these young adults maintained a strong connection with God. Furthermore, their desire to deepen their

faith was evident through their emphasis on serving others as a means of becoming more Christ-like.

The findings of this study suggest that spirituality is a crucial aspect of the lives of young adults with cognitive impairments. Their strong spiritual identity, based on personal experiences, the guidance of their families, and a desire for spiritual growth, highlights the importance of incorporating spiritual care in their overall well-being.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

Summary

Experience and Formation of Spirituality

There is a large amount of research describing the spiritual experiences of people within Christian communities of faith. This research tries to find out how these experiences differ or if they differ in the group of cognitively impaired young people. Young individuals with cognitive impairment articulated their spirituality as a dynamic, communal, affective, and intellectually grounded connection with God. This connection, based on their personal choice, exerts a discernible impact on their lives, influencing their daily behavior and choices.

Dynamic

The exploration within the realm of the Christian community encapsulates a multifaceted trajectory involving pursuit, refinement, and maturation, underscored by profound transformations, metamorphoses, and rebirths. The process of faith cultivation can also be construed as the intricate journey towards establishing a symbiotic rapport between humanity and the Divine Transcendence, denoted as God.

Embedded within the narratives of the research participants lie discernible congruencies in their description of the divine connection. Their spiritual odyssey materializes as an undulating trajectory, characterized by fluctuating crests and troughs, often contingent upon the intricacies of their existential circumstances, though not exclusively so. The testimonials garnered from the interviewees distinctly illustrate that the process of faith cultivation is inherently manifested as precarious, mirroring the inherent instability intrinsic to human nature.

This inherent impermanence of humanity, juxtaposed against the unwavering constancy of the divine realm, underscores the core dialectic at play—the flux of human progression as both a consequence of our volition and an effect of our imperfection, while also bearing the hallmark of divine descent. This interjection of the divine introduces a transformative facet to the equation, signifying that God's influence permeates the human experience through a diverse array of conduits, transcending the limitations imposed by human frailties. This revelation holds special significance for individuals with cognitive impairments, imparting a beacon of hope that remains undiminished despite their challenges. Intriguingly, this paradigm challenges the notion that the spiritual journey is solely predicated on human endeavor and capabilities. Rather, it signifies the existence of a divine undercurrent that harmonizes with human striving, shaping an intricate narrative where both human volition and divine engagement cooperate.

Communal

The concept of community, or fellowship, emerges as an important constituent within the lives of the majority of Christians, as underscored by the significance

attributed to community within the context of John 1:3–7. Each participant under scrutiny in this study encountered a pivotal individual in their life who served as a conduit towards a profound connection with the divine, echoing the sentiments of the biblical passage. Consequently, their trajectories led them to varying degrees of involvement in religious ceremonies and congregational gatherings.

Notwithstanding the subsequent diversification in their degrees of integration within the community, a common thread emerged: their initial encounter with the divine was through another human being. This primary intermediary figure, often connected to emotional significance, played a foundational role. Scripture, notably Mark 18:20, aptly captures this essence: “For wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” This verse further accentuates the sanctity of communal engagement where the divine presence manifests within the collective spiritual bond, mirroring the participants' shared experiences.

Intellectual

The process of faith formation can be deconstructed into two pivotal facets, each carrying distinct importance. The initial facet pertains to emotional maturation, followed by the subsequent facet of cognitive advancement. However, it is evident that in instances involving individuals with cognitive impairments, a certain asymmetry emerges between these two pillars.

An analysis of participant testimonies resonates with a recurrent theme—emotional resonance assumes a paramount role in their connection with the divine. The emphasis primarily gravitates toward nurturing a profound emotional bond between humanity and the divine, rather than prioritizing cognitive knowledge. In essence, their

narratives place in the foreground an experiential rapport as the center of their spiritual journey, elevating the significance of emotive experiences over cognitive constructs.

The intellectual cultivation of faith reveals two fundamental phenomena. The initial phenomenon revolves around self-awareness—a process of comprehending one’s own identity and essence. The subsequent phenomenon focuses on the apprehension of the divine, encapsulating the pursuit of comprehending God.

In this journey of intellectual enrichment, the Bible assumes a dual role. First, it functions as a source through which these phenomena can be studied, unveiling insights into both self-discovery and divine comprehension. Second, the individual’s personal experiential landscape emerges as another important arena for exploration. This fusion contributes to a comprehension of both personal identity and the divine realm, fostering a profound intellectual framework for the development of faith.

Affective (Feeling, Emotional)

At the heart of belief in the divine lies the endeavor to understand the nature of God—an aspiration rooted in comprehending the attributes that characterize the divine essence. This pursuit of understanding is obtained mainly through experiential encounters, with emotional dimensions serving as a prominent vantage point. This framework, in turn, engenders a profound sense of assurance.

In essence, belief in God is thus a synthesis of immersive experiences, harmonizing with cognitive understanding in order to shape a multifaceted comprehension of the divine. The emotional trajectory of these experiences informs cognitive knowledge, creating a certainty that supports the foundation of faith.

The interplay between these facets—intellectual knowledge from scriptural and affective experiences grounded in observation—shows a colorful spectrum of faith expressions. The intermingling of intellect and experience within the realm of faith exploration offers many possible ways of knowing God and experiencing the divine. This opens the many possible channels for people with cognitively impaired people to form a relationship with God and to experience spirituality.

Behavioral

The formation of faith is closely related to behavior because in the process of searching for God, a new moral and value system is acquired at the same time. This intertwining between belief and behavior extends to such a degree that faith can transcend rational discourse, profoundly impacting an individual's value framework. The influence of faith on one's values is often profound, occasionally manifesting in a manner that defies conventional rationality. These values, which profoundly shape behavior, originate through dual pathways. The initial trajectory unfolds through choices rooted in an intimate communion with the divine—a personalized rapport that guides decisions. The second trajectory emanates from established commandments and doctrinal principles woven into the Christian tradition, encapsulating a structured moral foundation.

Thus, the complex choreography between faith, values, and behavior unveils a multifaceted panorama where the journey toward God not only shapes one's internal moral compass, but also impels actions. The interviews conducted underscore how these spiritual convictions are intricately interwoven through daily life, notably within the experiences of individuals with cognitive impairments.

Choice

One of the initial milestones in the journey of faith formation encompasses the moment when an individual decides to embrace belief in God. This assumes paramount significance, considering that the existence of God inherently eludes empirical proof, thereby engendering a realm of choice between the “provable” realm and the domain of faith in the divine.

This occurrence holds transformative implications within the life of a Christian, signifying not only the resolve to believe, but also a profound surrender into the embrace of God. The crux of this decision rests upon its voluntary nature—a volitional choice made freely without any external constraints.

Discussion of Findings

This research, undertaken with the intent to delve deeper into the spirituality of select cognitively impaired Christian young adults harnessed a hermeneutic approach. This methodology delved into the lived experiences of the participants, focusing on their faith narratives. These experiential accounts were then woven together, merging participant insights with my comprehension and interpretation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven young adults presenting cognitive impairments who actively participate in Christian congregational communities of faith.

In essence, this research sought to illuminate the complex interplay of faith and cognitive diversity, amplifying the nuanced spiritual landscapes of these young individuals within the context of their Christian journeys.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, a chosen approach, is an interpretive journey. Here, I navigate through the participants’ lived experiences, unraveling the deeper meanings within the broader context of their lives. This approach is suited for this inquiry,

especially given the aim to come to an understanding of a phenomenon through the dynamic interplay between researcher and participant. This study underscores the pivotal role of a hermeneutic approach in contextualizing the participants' spiritual experiences and interpreting the implications on their lives.

The scope of this study is intricately tailored to a specific and limited cohort of individuals with whom direct personal engagement was established. The narratives and insights presented come directly from the individuals with impairments themselves, not from their family members or caregivers. A distinguishing facet of this research lies in its qualitative nature, designed to apprehend the nuanced dimensions of personality, motivations, and underlying presumptions of the interviewees.

This qualitative approach offers a unique vantage point into the spiritual landscapes of the participants under scrutiny. By delving into their lived experiences, this methodology grants us an intimate and personal glimpse into the faith journeys of individuals with cognitive impairment. This lens facilitates the examination of their spiritual beliefs and practices, shedding light on the interplay of their unique traits, motivations, and assumptions. Consequently, this approach yields a more profound understanding of the spiritual lives of these individuals, allowing their voices to be heard.

Throughout the research, a number of commonalities were evident in the remarks made by the interviewees. One of the most significant areas of agreement among their statements is the belief in the existence of God. This acknowledgement serves as both a foundation for placing trust in God and a steppingstone toward further developing one's spiritual identity. However, the interviewees do not provide intricate arguments to prove

God's existence. Instead, they express contentment in their straightforward faith in God's presence.

A shared theme that emerges from their accounts is a personal relationship with God. This connection, central to their experiences, is the most substantial evidence they offer for the existence of the divine. They perceive God as a close friend who is actively present in their daily lives. What is important is that they also recognize that God's influence extends beyond their own lives, encompassing the lives of those around them. This realization highlights a sense of divine care that reaches not only themselves, but also extends to the welfare of everyone they interact with.

According to the individuals who were interviewed, God assumes the role of a guiding presence in times of adversity. This notion of "assisting others" emerged as significant in relation to their personal well-being and contentment. To them, God is an unfailingly benevolent force, offering aid in difficult times, empowering the feeble, and extending compassion to the isolated. However, their accounts convey a deeper perception—God is not solely a provider of assistance, but also the source of life itself, and simultaneously, the orchestrator of worldly occurrences.

From their perspective, God stands as a pillar of support, offering unwavering love that sustains and envelops them. This love is not sporadic; rather, it is perceived and embraced daily. Consequently, their perception of God is not confined to the roles of a mere creator or an idle observer; instead, God is intricately enmeshed in their lives, actively participating in their journeys. It is this aspect of God, engaged in ordinary existence, that forms a cornerstone for fostering a genuine and profound connection between these individuals and the divine. They perceive God as the embodiment of all

that is positive in the world—a guiding force through life’s challenges and a beacon even amid the darkest moments.

Another pivotal attribute ascribed to God is authenticity. The interviewees unanimously concurred that God’s nature remains consistent with how He manifests in their lives; there is no pretense. When God declares that He will stand by them, they believed that this commitment holds true. The participants drew from their experiences of disappointment caused by human fallibility. In these instances, God emerges as a constant and dependable support, a refuge that remains accessible since His love extends unconditionally to them.

Throughout the research, a recurring phrase, “not fake,” emerged in the accounts of six participants. They frequently contrasted individuals whom they perceived as insincere with their perception of God as genuine. One participant, Vierka, shared a specific incident involving her mother’s behavior, highlighting the significance of distinguishing between actions and intentions. Vierka’s assessment of the situation holds importance as she differentiates between outward actions and inner thoughts. She recognizes that God’s judgment is based on a person’s character, rather than just their external conduct. This observation from Vierka not only underscores her profound connection with God, but also reflects her contemplative engagement with this matter. This elevated level of thought is a common thread among all the participants, signifying a depth of reflection that merits attention.

It is imperative to acknowledge this aspect and recognize that, despite cognitive abilities that differ from the norm, these individuals possess the capacity for profound contemplation. This capacity is evident in their shared inclination to think in a deeper

dimension. This collective tendency to engage in profound thought should not be overlooked. It serves as a reminder that, while their cognitive functions might differ from those of typical individuals, they are fully capable of such profound reflection and, consequently, of nurturing their inner selves.

For the participants, God embodies consistency in keeping promises, in contrast to the surrounding world that often leads to disappointment. This particular facet of their relationship with God holds significance, given that each of them has navigated challenging life situations. Remarkably, despite these difficulties, none of the interviewees displayed animosity towards God. This does not imply a blind obedience, as they raised thought-provoking questions and expressed inquiries about the occurrence of unfortunate events. For instance, Maya inquired, “If He's so kind to us, to me, why does He allow bad things? Why do parents behave that way?” Maya’s question stems from a genuine desire to comprehend why unfortunate events occur, events that, ostensibly, God’s power could prevent.

It is essential to recognize that their statements are not devoid of uncertainties. Vierka, for example, openly acknowledged being occasionally angry with God and harboring doubts about His goodness. She associated these feelings with a distressing period in her life when she lost her mother and shortly thereafter, her grandmother passed away.

A shared experience that profoundly affected all the participants was the war in Ukraine. Simon encapsulated the sentiments of others with his question: “Why do innocent people suffer?” Living in Bratislava, they witnessed the influx of people fleeing Ukraine, which significantly influenced their perceptions. Their statements mirrored a

blend of emotions: sorrow, pain, sadness, anger, and a feeling of helplessness. Despite their own challenges, these individuals exhibited deep empathy for the Ukrainian refugees and other suffering individuals, showcasing a profound sense of compassion.

In addition to these emotions, the participants confided that there were moments when they felt as if God had withdrawn, remaining silent and distant. However, a common theme in their accounts is the unwavering belief that God will eventually return, restoring everything to its prior state. This conviction is exemplified by Peter's assertion: "After all, He promised." This statement is noteworthy because, despite the emotional disconnect, Peter's trust hinges on God's promise, revealing an intellectual reliance on God even in the absence of a strong emotional connection.

This sentiment can be likened to a test, akin to facing a wave in the sea. It is akin to holding one's breath, trusting that the wave will pass, and resuming normalcy. This underscores the testing of their faith, echoing the sentiment that it is easy to love someone who only brings goodness. This dynamic mirrors the experience of swimming in the sea, when confronted by a substantial wave necessitating breath-holding; it is an evaluation of trust, akin to how they rely on God's promise during times of emotional detachment.

The research unveiled a common thread: all the individuals surveyed independently chose to embrace a belief in God. Their initial encounters with the concept of God and the church were primarily through someone close to them. At times, circumstances led them to attend church involuntarily; nonetheless, they subsequently embraced God of their own volition. Currently, their engagement in prayer, attending church, and participating in church activities is driven by their personal choices.

Among the seven participants, six were introduced to God by their parents or grandparents. It was within the familial context that the bedrock of their faith was laid and a firm moral compass was instilled within them. Their recollections of their initial encounters with God are poignant, with positive associations connected to those who guided them to God. These formative experiences were cherished, and the relationships with those who introduced them to God were regarded warmly.

Maya, however, stands as a unique case among the interviewees. Her introduction to God did not occur during her childhood, setting her apart from the rest.

Maya's testimony sheds light on the significant role of the church as a community. She recounts facing numerous challenges in her life, yet found solace in the presence of a few "authentic individuals" who genuinely offered assistance. One such individual was a nun she encountered at the church who embodied authenticity in her eyes. Similarly, the principal of her school also stood out as another real figure, both serving as role models for the person she aspired to become. In this context, these figures became the embodiment of the "church" for her—individuals who constituted a community where she felt valued, cared for, and accepted.

In terms of attending church services and engaging in communal activities, the perspectives of the interviewees are diverse, often contrasting with one another. While John experienced a sense of belonging and acceptance within the church environment, Hana had a different encounter. For her, the church did not provide the sense of companionship she sought, leaving her feeling isolated. This divergence in experience could potentially be attributed to the unique personality traits of the interviewees.

Nonetheless, a commonality arises in their positive regard for sermons. The preaching they receive serves as both an inspiration and a catalyst for introspection, as exemplified by Maya's statement that sermons provide a "stimulus to think." However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the opportunity to attend church and engage in sermons in person. This shift to online formats impacted their spiritual lives negatively, an impact acutely felt by John, who expressed the difficulty of connecting with God during this period. His sentiments reflect the gravity of this influence on his spiritual well-being. For instance, he does not engage with online sermons as they do not replicate the experience of in-person community presence. Others share similar views, including Vierka, who, despite her pandemic-related concerns, still visits the church premises when it is devoid of others.

A comprehensive analysis of these statements underscores the significance of shared experiences in shaping the spiritual lives of each participant. This shared experience forms a foundational element that impacts their relationship with spirituality.

Prayer emerges as another noteworthy facet in the lives of these individuals. They view prayer as a conduit for communicating with God. Recognizing that a relationship thrives on mutuality, they emphasize the significance of prayer. It serves not only as a means of personal enrichment, but also as a way to extend support to others. Beyond their empathy for Ukrainian refugees, they actively pray for them, believing in the potential of divine intervention.

Each participant possesses personal encounters with divine assistance through prayer, reinforcing their perception of prayer as a practical and effective instrument. Unlike Communion, which is constrained by specific contexts, prayer is accessible at all

times and in all situations. This accessibility prompts them to engage in prayer daily, considering it a pivotal avenue of communication with God. They discern that prayer plays a transformative role in their lives, fostering a deepened relationship with the divine that, in turn, is manifested in their daily existence.

Within their narratives, a shared aspiration to nurture spiritual growth and become better individuals for both God and those around them comes to the fore. They exhibit an acute awareness of their own shortcomings and errors, acknowledging their inherent imperfections and the necessity for personal evolution. John articulates his yearning to “experience” God’s pride, particularly since he recognizes that achieving this feat in his parents’ eyes might remain elusive.

Recognizing the need for guidance in their personal development, these young individuals are resolute in their belief that they must disseminate God’s love to others and serve as living exemplars. Having endured the tribulations of the world, they are motivated to extend the same aid they have received to those in need. The notion of assisting others emerges repeatedly in their statements, manifested in diverse contexts. This collective sentiment underscores the profound relationship they hold with God and the depth of their spiritual identity.

Their cognitive impairments notwithstanding, their narratives underscore the potency of their connection with God and their profound spiritual sense. Their perspectives extend beyond rudimentary knowledge, encompassing a profound comprehension that culminates in their realization of their own requirement for support.

Concluding Reflections

This study was created with the intention of gaining an insight into the spiritual

life of individuals with cognitive impairments. For this purpose, seven individuals with cognitive impairments who are members of the Christian Church were selected. All participants were young adults and, at the time of the research, lived in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. The research was conducted using the hermeneutic phenomenological method. This method was chosen because of the possibility of personal interaction, which makes it easier to understand the experience of these people. After that, the structured interviews themselves were conducted and statements were written based on them. This study also includes a description of these interviewees so that we are able to place their testimony in the broader framework of their personality and other life factors.

I had already realized at the time of conducting the interviews that these people also have their inner desires, and that it is our duty to help them fulfill these desires. It was only later, when I thought about the statements again, that I really realized the dimension in which these people with cognitive impairments are able to think. They pondered questions of good and evil, guilt, and their place in the world. They were looking for God and, with His help, themselves. They tried to be better people not only for themselves, but also for God and for the people around them. All this suggests to us a way of thinking outside of the framework of the human ego, because the human ego prioritizes itself over others. However, in their statements, these people demonstrated a selfless desire to help and be there for others. Despite their confessed sins, they yearn for something better than this world. They realize their own helplessness. The result of this study is, therefore, primarily the depth in which these people with cognitive impairments are able to think and feel.

The core purpose of this study was to gain profound insights into the spiritual experiences of individuals with cognitive impairments. The research specifically centered on seven young adults who were part of the Christian Church community and residing in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. Employing the hermeneutic phenomenological method, the study was crafted to enable personal interactions, offering a clearer understanding of these individuals' experiences. Structured interviews formed the basis of data collection, generating statements that were subsequently analyzed. The study also encompasses participant descriptions, which contextualize their testimonies within their broader personalities and life circumstances.

Upon embarking on the interview process, an initial awareness dawned upon me—that these individuals possess their own internal yearnings, and as a collective, we bear a responsibility to facilitate the realization of these aspirations. Subsequently, upon revisiting and contemplating their statements, a more profound realization unfolded regarding the cognitive scope exhibited by these individuals with cognitive impairments. In their narratives, they grappled with profound queries surrounding ethical dilemmas, notions of right and wrong, and their existential roles within the world. Their quest extended beyond the mere search for God; it was a simultaneous pursuit of self-discovery guided by the divine. In essence, their endeavor encompassed a twofold mission: to refine themselves not only for their personal advancement, but also for the betterment of their relationship with God and the welfare of their fellow beings.

This journey into their narratives offers a vantage point to contemplate a perspective transcending the boundaries of self-centeredness. In stark contrast to the ego's self-prioritization, these individuals exuded a selfless propensity to lend support

and assistance to others, unfazed by their own acknowledged flaws. Their yearning for a transcendent reality, surpassing the limits of this present world, coexists with an astute awareness of their own limitations. Therefore, at the heart of the study's findings lies the remarkable depth of their cognitive and emotional capacity.

Their steadfast bond with God, despite the adversity they encounter, stands as an inspiring testament of their unwavering faith. This bond illuminates their resilience amid challenges. Moreover, it is incumbent upon our Church community to discern that individuals with cognitive impairments possess the capacity to offer substantive contributions to our congregation. Their role should extend beyond passive participation; they are potential contributors. Thus, it is our duty as a community to embrace an inclusive approach, actively fostering their integration. The research resoundingly underscores their aptitude for forging a spiritual connection with God—this is not a passive connection, but rather, one they actively seek, an interaction that profoundly transforms them. In doing so, they enrich not only their own spiritual journeys, but also the broader tapestry of the congregational experience.

Future Research

Introduction

Throughout the process of assembling materials and shaping the overall trajectory of this study, it has become apparent that the realm of investigation within the subject matter remains substantially unexplored, presenting a fertile ground for further inquiry. This condition arises primarily from the inherent specificity of the topic and, secondarily, from the persisting lack of comprehensive attention directed towards individuals with cognitive impairments despite ongoing endeavors to integrate them within society.

Paradoxically, their spiritual lives exhibit pronounced manifestations akin to those of their non-disabled counterparts. As such, this study was conceived as an initial foray into comprehending the spiritual terrain of individuals with cognitive impairments. The expansive nature of the study's objective, however, inevitably renders certain inquiries unanswered. Yet, in our endeavor to enhance the quality of life for these individuals, it becomes incumbent upon us to articulate these queries and actively pursue resolutions.

Avenues for Subsequent Investigation

Religious Behavior and Belief

Prominent among the avenues meriting further exploration lies the realm of "religious behavior." Individuals with cognitive impairments engage in acts of religious devotion, such as prayer and church attendance, akin to their non-disabled peers. While exceptions exist, exemplified by participants with varying levels of interest in congregational engagement or daily Scripture reading, this diversity is analogous to that observed among other adherents of the Christian faith. Nonetheless, this diversity in outward expressions of faith does not diminish their significance. Quite the opposite, as discerned from their testimonies, these acts stand as fundamental conduits of communication with the Divine, constituting an integral facet of their spirituality. Each individual's experience of faith manifests uniquely, influenced by the distinctive dimensions of their personalities. Notably, the personal predilections for religious practices are informed by individual traits. For instance, an introverted individual may not actively seek fervent participation in communal worship, as opposed to an extroverted counterpart. Consequently, it appears that the significance of religious behavior holds consistent resonance for individuals with cognitive impairments in

parallel with other believers. Nonetheless, this understanding beckons further investigation, as the study did not centralize the exploration of religiosity among the people with cognitive impairments, and their perspectives on this subject remained only tangentially touched upon within their narratives.

Efficacy of Church Integration

A noteworthy revelation emerging from the participants' narratives pertains to the discernible enhancement in their overall quality of life subsequent to their integration into the church community. However, apprehending this phenomenon presents a challenge due to the concurrent occurrence of accepting God as their Savior and becoming part of the church. Consequently, determining the precise factor exerting such a substantial influence on the amelioration of participants' lives remains elusive. One could speculate that heightened social engagement potentially underlies the observed comprehensive enhancement in the lives of the cognitively impaired. However, this premise confronts the intricacies of individuality, exemplified by the divergent approaches embraced by participants.

Indeed, the fabric of individuality weaves through their narratives, a constant that extends beyond the study's confines. The distinctive nature of a relationship with God fundamentally shapes spiritual requisites and the pathways through which they are fulfilled. Hence, the query arises as to whether this inquiry can yield unequivocal conclusions, thereby unveiling a universal perspective on addressing the spiritual needs of individuals with cognitive impairments.

Navigating the intricacies of this issue necessitates traversing a nuanced terrain, acknowledging the interplay of multifaceted variables. This exploration compels us to

embrace a paradigm that not only contemplates the shared threads of communal integration, but also delves into the diverse hues of personal spiritual connections. Only through such a nuanced exploration can we hope to uncover insights that resonate across the spectrum of cognitive diversity, ultimately refining our understanding of the intricate intersection between spirituality, community, and individuality.

Significance of the Intellectual Aspect in Faith

In contemplating the realm encapsulated by the study, an inevitable inquiry surfaces: Is the intellectual dimension integral to faith's fabric? The study's findings converge on a profound revelation—individuals with cognitive impairments exhibit an intricate spiritual dimension, accompanied by a discernible display of intellectual aptitude. In essence, they unveil their capacity to traverse avenues of faith that extend beyond the perimeters of conventional dogma. This implies an inherent capability to examine introspectively their spiritual journey autonomously, transcending mere adherence to established beliefs.

This autonomy of thought is often correlated with intellectual prowess. A pivotal question emerges: Is this capability for insightful exploration a product of intellectual prowess, or does it emanate from their communion with the divine? In essence, does it derive from an intrinsic source—namely, a divine connection—or does it rely on external stimuli or an individual's cognitive faculties? This intricate juncture underscores the necessity for further investigation, ideally encompassing a broader cohort of respondents.

To fathom the precise nature of this interplay, a comprehensive exploration is imperative. Elucidating whether this intrinsic spiritual insight is a byproduct of

intellectual acumen, or an endowment bestowed by divine presence remains a pivotal query. It necessitates a comprehensive study, one that delves deeper into the interwoven threads of spirituality and cognition. Through this broader lens, we may discern whether the wellspring of their spiritual acumen is rooted in intellectual prowess or nurtured by their connection with the divine—a question that holds profound implications for our understanding of faith’s multifaceted dimensions.

Empathy’s Nexus with Belief in God

The conspicuous trait among all the participants in this study is their exceptional level of empathy—a quality that distinguishes their collective narratives. Each interviewee manifested an innate drive to extend aid, with the aspiration to better the lives of others, thereby deriving fulfillment and joy. This altruistic propensity finds resonance in their personal histories as they themselves have navigated circumstances where they sought assistance. This circumstance naturally prompts inquiry into the origins of this profound altruistic inclination. Does it stem from the crucible of their challenging life experiences or is it awakened and nurtured by the presence of God in their lives?

Crucially, it is noteworthy that not all individuals respond to adversity with an inclination to aid others. Often, grievances can result in withdrawal and the reluctance to extend assistance to fellow beings. Remarkably, despite the adversities that have befallen these seven individuals with cognitive impairments, none of them withdraws from society or shies away from lending aid. This phenomenon beckons an exploration of whether their empathetic predisposition is a consequence of their adversity or whether it is catalyzed by their faith in God.

The overarching query here pertains to the intricate interplay between faith and empathy. Does their belief in God act as a catalyst, fostering a deep-seated impulse to alleviate the suffering of others? Is it the conduit through which empathy is channeled and amplified? Or does this propensity stem from their personal experiences and encounters with adversity? The interwoven dynamics of faith and empathy beckon further scrutiny, calling for nuanced research that delves into the mechanisms underlying the development of empathy within the community of people with cognitive impairments. An in-depth exploration could illuminate the intricate connection between their spiritual beliefs and their profound ability to empathize, thus enriching our understanding of the spiritual and emotional dimensions of their lives.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this qualitative study has shed valuable light on the spiritual lives of individuals with cognitive impairment, there exists a promising avenue for future research to broaden and deepen our understanding. To achieve a more comprehensive perspective, it is advisable to employ a methodological approach that involves a larger and more diverse pool of respondents. This expansion would ideally encompass a global or national scale, mitigating the potential influence of specific regional or societal factors.

However, the preservation of the personal rapport between the researcher and interviewees is of paramount importance. Cognitively impaired individuals might encounter challenges in articulating their emotions and thoughts, necessitating an empathetic and understanding approach from researchers. The researcher's receptiveness and capacity to capture the interviewee's sentiments and insights authentically hold the key to enriching the study's outcomes.

Moreover, it would be fruitful to delve into spirituality from perspectives beyond Christianity. Exploring the spiritual experiences and beliefs of individuals with cognitive impairments within other religious frameworks could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how faith interfaces with cognitive diversity.

In sum, future research endeavors should strive for a larger and more diverse participant pool while upholding the integrity of personal engagement. This nuanced approach would amplify the study's impact, contributing to a deeper comprehension of spirituality among individuals with cognitive impairment and promoting inclusive insights into their profound journeys.

Limitations of the Study

It is imperative to reiterate that this study has been intentionally confined to a small cohort of individuals with cognitive impairments, aiming to scrutinize the intricate dimensions of their spiritual lives. Nevertheless, the very nature of these objectives inevitably confers limitations upon the study, profoundly shaping its research methodology. Although the chosen method served its intended purpose within the defined scope, it remains evident that the small number of participants hampers the ability to extrapolate more generalizable conclusions or formulate comprehensive theories.

Consequently, the study's capacity to assert broad-reaching claims is restricted by the limited sample size, prompting a call for the amplification of respondents in the "Future Research" segment. It is, however, crucial to acknowledge the indispensable role played by the individualized approach in the chosen methodology. As future research endeavors aspire to expand the participant pool, it is paramount that this expansion not come at the detriment of the personalized engagement that characterizes this study's

unique insights. Striking a balance between broader representation and the preservation of personalized understanding remains an essential consideration for forthcoming investigations.

Contribution of the Study

Undoubtedly, the most noteworthy contribution of this study lies in its exploration of the imperative theme of integrating cognitively impaired individuals within the ecclesiastical realm. Present times are characterized by heightened sensitivity towards inclusivity, and the discourse of inclusion has garnered substantial attention and practical implementation. This inclusivity extends to spheres of employment and social engagement. Young adults with cognitive impairment have the choice of attending either specialized schools or mainstream educational institutions. In addition, the establishment of sheltered workshops and supportive living arrangements for adults with cognitive impairments reflects progress in this area. While these strides are commendable, it is evident that discussions regarding the spiritual lives of the individuals with impairments have remained conspicuously neglected, underscoring the pivotal role that this study assumes.

Amidst a progressive society, the spiritual dimensions of the community of people with impairments have often languished as a sidelined topic, lacking the emphasis they warrant. However, the study's findings compellingly underscore the cognitive capabilities of individuals with cognitive impairments. These cognitive faculties actively contribute in a significant way to their ability to navigate through challenging life circumstances. While the origins of these difficulties may not directly stem from their cognitive impairments, the inherent challenges they face amplify the impact of trying

situations. This study's potential for impact transcends the boundaries of the academic realm, extending its reach to encompass the lives of numerous individuals with impairments and their social circles.

It is pertinent to emphasize that while this study does not proffer a conclusive solution to the complexities of spiritual life within the community of individuals with cognitive impairment, it tangibly validates the very existence of this question and its profound significance in the lives of those with cognitive impairments. This recognition, inherent in the study's outcomes, serves as a clarion call for a more inclusive perspective that acknowledges the spiritual needs and capacities of this community, thus catalyzing the creation of an environment where their spiritual well-being can be nurtured and integrated.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Andrews University

Informed Consent Form

Research Title: Spiritual Experiences of Cognitively Impaired Young People within the Christian Communities of Faith

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Principal Investigator: Lea Danihelova

Research Advisors: David Sedlacek, Alina Baltazar

Statements about the Research: This research study is part of my PhD dissertation, in partial fulfillment for my PhD in Religious Education, at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this research is to better understand the spirituality of selected cognitively impaired Christian young people.

Procedures: Each of the participants will be interviewed. The researcher will at first engage in informal conversation with the participant. The questions about the research will be asked only if the participants will feel comfortable interacting with the researcher. The participants can refuse to communicate with the researcher at any given time. The hope of the researcher is to ask the participants semi-structured (prepared) and

unstructured questions (unprepared, arising from the situation) about their spiritual life within a Christian community of faith.

The interviews will be transcribed. The researcher will try to find common themes that will come up in the interviews. The identity of the participants will be protected and the information from the interviews will be available just to the researcher and the research team. The results will be discussed with the participants. The participants will be treated through the whole research with respect and dignity, as equal partners with the researcher.

Duration of participation in study: The researcher assumes that there will be a need for several shorter interviews. The place where the interviews will take place can be arranged based on where the participant will feel the most comfortable.

Risks and Benefits: The subject that the participants will be talking about can create feelings of sadness or anxiety. If the researcher sees any discomfort in the participants or the participants state that they do not feel comfortable, they will not have to continue in the discussion. There are not any other anticipated risks to the participants.

The researcher hopes that the research will help the Christian communities of faith better understand the needs of cognitively impaired individuals. The participants can have a feeling of accomplishment by helping in this process.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security: The privacy of the participants will be secured by using code names for the participants in the study. The identifying information will be kept in a secure, separate place as well as the signed consent forms. The data will be stored in password protected files and will be available for viewing only to the research team.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. There will be nothing linking you to the study. None of your identifiers, if any, will be used in any report or publication.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and have received answers to any question I asked. I
Consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date: _____

Your Name _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLES OF SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS
ON SPECIFIC TOPICS

Community

Analysis: Narrative	Codes	Memos
<p>Kazateľ musí hovoriť s citom a nie iba s inteligenciou, lebo keď je to bez citu, tak to nemá chuť. Marek nemá iba dobrú inteligenciu, ale aj dobrý cit. Má lepšie kázania ako ostatní, lebo sú také živé, zo života, nie len také nijaké. Jeho kázania majú chuť. Keď kázania nemajú svoju chuť tak to znamená, že ho to nebaví.</p> <p>The pastor needs to talk with feelings not only with intelligence because without feelings it does not have a taste. Pastor Mark has not only intelligence but also good emotions. He has better sermons because they are from life and not only just like that. His sermons have taste. If there is not taste it means it does not interest him.</p>	<p>Not Fake Understanding God's Word Connecting with God</p>	<p>Practical application of faith, not just words that are not connected to theory help the listeners to connect and understand the Word of God.</p>
<p>Online nikto nemôže získať medailu. Ja dávam všetkým medaily. Zlaté, strieborné, železné, alebo bronzové. Bronzové sú najhoršie. Ale online by som dal hlinené. Online ma to nebaví. Online je to nanič. To je ako zlý film. Mňa to baví, keď sú tam ľudia. Lebo sú to potom mŕtve veci. Keď to nemá zmysel, tak je to nanič. A keď sa mi to nepáči, tak to nemôžem chcieť. Keď sa mi to nepáči, tak to vyhodím. Vážim si veci, ale nie za cenu toho, že budem trpieť. Teraz aj skupinky máme online. Všetko je online. Je to hlinené.</p>	<p>Face to face community Online community Importance of connecting with people</p>	<p>The online environment made everything more intellectual without creating real connections. It created a feeling of loneliness, detachment, isolation to the point that it was not worthy to participate.</p>

<p>No one can receive a medal for online. I am giving medals to everyone: gold, silver, or bronze. The bronze are the worst. But for online I would give clay. I am not interested in online. Online is not good. It is as a bad movie. I love, when there are people. Because then there are just dead things. When there is no meaning, it is for nothing. And if I do not like it, I cannot want it. If I do not like it, I throw it away. I value things but not if I suffer for it. We have also small groups online. All is online. All is from clay.</p>		
<p>Najlepší boli tí starší. S tými som si najviac rozumel. Mne sa to takto vybavilo v živote, že som mal starších, ale aj s mladšími som si v zbore rozumel. Ale oni ma nechceli. Ja som ich chcel, ale oni ma nechceli. Rozčuľovalo mato. Nevzdal som sa Pána Ježiša, aj keď oni boli na mňa takí. Ja stále Pána Boha milujem viac než kamarátov. Keď už oni nie, tak aspoň Pán Boh. Viem, že sa Pán postará o všetkých nás. Ja tomu tak verím a viem, že to tak existuje a že to nie je výmysel. Pán sa stará.</p> <p>The old people were the best. I understood them the most. It came to be so in my life, that I have the old, but I also had some younger friends in the church. But they did not want me. I wanted them, but they did not want me. I was upset about it. But I did not give up on Jesus Christ even if the young people were not nice to me. I still love Jesus more than friends. If there are no friends, there is at least Jesus. I know that God takes care of all of us. I believe it and I know that He exists and I know it is not made up. God cares.</p>	<p>Community Seclusion Personal Connection with God God cares</p>	<p>The connection with God does not depend on friendship with people. God is there even if people betray us.</p>

God

<p>Viem, že Ježiš je chlieb života. On to sám povedal. Tak to je. Dáva ľuďom život.</p> <p>Jesus said that he is the bread of life. It is so. He is the bread of life. He gives life to people.</p>	<p>God is life</p>	<p>Deep theological truth taken at faith value.</p>
<p>Kvôli Ukrajine nemôžem spievať. Keď vidíte tých ľudí na stanici. V nedeľu som prichádzala a taký chlapec z ukrajiny päťročný s ukrajinskou vlajkou tam plakal, strašne plakal. To trhá srdce človeku. A tak si pomyslím, že prečo to Boh tak nechal. Prečo to dopustil? Aj rakovinu prečo dopustil? A COVID?</p>	<p>Good and evil Existence of evil Feeling for others</p>	<p>The deep question of existence of evil and bad things happening to good people is not a question exclusive to people with high intelligence or theologians. These are questions that are relevant to all people and are understood on some level.</p>
<p>I cannot sing because of Ukraine. When you see those people at the station. I was walking on Sunday and there was a small boy, like five years old with a Ukrainian flag. He was crying, terribly crying. It is breaking my heart. And so I think, why did God allow it? Why did he leave it like that? Also why did he let cancer happen? And COVID?</p>		

<p>Modlievam sa k Bohu, ale neviem, či je úplne dobrý. Možno ho spoznám, až keď budem s ním tam hore. Verím Bohu, ale zároveň sa hnevám. Zobral mi blízke osoby. Mama v novembri a babka o štyri mesiace neskôr. Tak čo. Babka na otravu krvi. Nemám rad ana Bohu, že berie ľudí. Mladých ľudí, deti s rakovinou aj dospelých s rakovinou. Ale hlavne, že ich berie. Na jednej strane je fajn, že ich nenechá trápiť, keď sa im niečo stane, ale nechá tam tú rodinu smutnú.</p>	<p>Good and evil Existence of evil Feeling for others</p>	<p>The deep question of existence of evil and bad things happening to good people is not a question exclusive to people with high intelligence or theologians. These are questions that are relevant to all people and are understood on some level.</p>
<p>I pray to God but I do not know if he is really good. Maybe I will know Him only when I will be with Him up there. I believe in God, but I am also angry. He took close people. Mom died in November and grandmother four months later. So what. Grandmother died because of blood poisoning. I do not like that God takes people. Young people, people with cancer and adults with cancer. But mostly, that He is taking them. It is good, that He will not let them suffer when something happens to them, but He leaves the family there, sad.</p>		
<p>Na Bohu mám rada, že mi dáva každý deň silu, keď sa zobudím. Že mi dal to, že som sa mohla z korony dostať. To sa nemuselo stať. Dáva mi silu.</p> <p>Vierka: I like God because He gives me strength when I wake up. He gave me that I could overcome Corona. It did not have to happen. He gives me strength.</p>	<p>Love for God Sustainer Helper Healer</p>	<p>The young people with cognitive impairment realize that God is the one who sustains them and gives them life.</p>

Personal Connection with God

<p>Aj sa modlievam sama. Pomáha mi to. Akože treba sa za všetko trochu poďakovať aj na tej Ukrajine za tých chudákov, aby sa im podarilo prežiť, lebo je tam hrozne. Aj teraz tu nejakí prišli. Myslím na ich. Nechápem. Teraz tie malé detičky. Nechápem. Myslím na ich aspoň. A pomodlím sa a dúfam, že bude dobre.</p> <p>I also pray alone. It helps. It is needed to say thank you for everything a little. Also for those unfortunate people in Ukraine. I pray that they will survive because it is terrible there. Some of them came here. I think about them. I do not understand. Those small children. I do not understand. I at least think about them. And I pray and hope that it will be all well.</p>	<p>Prayer</p> <p>Helping others through prayer</p>	<p>The prayer is part of the life of these Christian young people. They choose it on their own. They see the effect of prayer in their lives.</p>
<p>Pre mňa je to s Bohom skôr o prežívaní ako o tom, že niečo študovať. Pán Boh mi dal veľa vecí. Dal mi život.</p> <p>For me it is more about living with God than about studying about Him. God gave me a lot of things. He gave me to live.</p>	<p>Connection with God</p> <p>Personal</p>	<p>Connection with God is based more on real life and experiences than on theoretical believes.</p>

<p>Tak ti to poviem, že sme všetci bez výnimky postihnutí. Ten kto sa hrá na nepostihnutého, tak je tiež postihnutý. Len ten, kto sa hrá, že je lepší ako ostatní, tak sa iba hrá. Jedenm psycholog povedal, že sme v takom stave, či je to flegmatik alebo autista, alebo neviem čo všetko možné. Všetci sme rovnakí, Započul som to na videu. On proste o tom raz povedal a tá myšlienka ma povzbudila. Nikto z nás nie je zdravý. Odvtedy tú myšlienku beriem. Všetci sme rovnakí a hotovo. Bez rozdielu. Všetci potrebujeme Pána Boha. Iba on je chlieb života. Bez neho nič nemá chuť. Niekedy sa zdá, že strom je slabý, ale až potom sa ukáže ako to bolo.</p> <p>I will tell you that all of us without an exception are impaired. Those who play that they are not impaired, they are also impaired. But those, who pretend, that they are better than others, they are only playing.- One psychologist said, that we are in a state, if you are phlegmatic, autistic, or whoever. We are all equal. I heard it on the video. He simply said that and this thought encouraged me. No one is healthy. We are all equal and it is so. Without exception. We all need God. Only he is the bread of life. Without him everything is tasteless. Sometimes it seems that a tree is weak but only after you will see how it really was.</p>	<p>Equal Acceptance Need of God We are all sinners Weak are strong</p>	<p>The thought that all are equal in Christ helps to feel accepted and to belong.</p> <p>The reality of sin that penetrates lives of all humans is understood on a very personal level.</p>
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Family and Early Life Influences

<p>Sobotu si ukončíme s ocinom. On niečo prečíta, alebo ja a v piatok sa tiež vystriedame. A tiež si zaspievame. Nie piesne tieto, ale také, čo nás bavia, lebo nie sme zákonníci, čo sa posväcujú. Lebo je to o charaktere človeka a nie o nálepkach. To je aj v hre. Nie je to len o hre, ale aj o hráčoch. Či ich to naozaj baví alebo to robia z donútenia. A mňa to baví. Ja nerobím nič, čo ma nebaví. Aj ocina to baví. Aj spievať. Aj má rád Pána Boha.</p> <p>We finish sabbath with my dad. He reads something, or me and on Friday we also take turns. And we also sing. No these songs, but songs that we love because we are not pharisees that want to be holy. Because it is about the character of a person and not about outside. It is the same in games. It is not only about a gamebut also about the players. I do not do anything that I am not interested in. Also my dad loves it to read. Also to sing. And he loves God.</p>	<p>Worship</p> <p>Reading the God's Word</p> <p>Prayer</p> <p>Singing</p> <p>Community</p>	<p>The worship at home is a joyous occasion, not something that needs to be done, not an obligation.</p> <p>Worshipping God together as a family is important part of Christian life.</p>
<p>Chodili sme rodičmi do kostola. Potom už prestali, lebo ochoreli, ale ja som chodila. Chodím. Ja chodím do malého žltého kostolíka. Dobrý je. Chodím na omše. Keď sa niekomu prihovorím, spoznajú ma. To hej. Chodí tam dosť ľudí, ale dá sa. Majú aj dobrého farára. Oni sa striedajú, oni sú príjemní, take pekné kázne majú. Mám to rada. Sestra tiež chodí aj s deťmi. Chodím s ňou, keď som v Bratislave. Aj mamina chodíeva. Aj sa modlíme doma. Pomáha mi to.</p>	<p>Church visit</p> <p>Community of believers</p> <p>Acceptance</p> <p>Sermons</p>	<p>The church visits are viewed as something that is helpful, that is nice, where this young person feels accepted and welcomed.</p>

<p>We went to the church with my parents. Then they stopped because they got sick but I did not stop. I still go. I go to a small yellow church. It is good. I go to the mass. When I speak with someone, they know me. Yes, they do. There are many people going to that church but it is OK. There is a good priest. They are taking turns, but they are all nice and they have nice sermons. I like it. My sister also goes to church. She goes with her kids. I go with her when I am in Bratislava. Also my mom goes. We also pray at home. It helps me.</p>		
<p>Pán Boh v mojom živote veľakrát pomohol, keďže som ho spoznal vďaka rodičom a vlastne ja som v neho aj uveril preto, lebo je v mojom živote. Aj ma rodičia učili, aby som sa ako sa to hovorí, veril a brávali ma aj do spoločenstva a veľa sa premodlievali. Oni sa za mňa veľa modlili a modlili a vlastne oni si ma vymodlili.</p> <p>God helps me many times in my life. I got to know him because of my parents. I believe in him because he is in my life. My parents also taught me to, how to say it, to belief and they took me to community of believers. They prayed for me a lot. They prayed for me and prayed for me. They god me because of their prayers.</p>	<p>Knowing God Importance of prayer God helps Community Family</p>	<p>The prayer is a live connection to God. God listens to our prayers. It is important to pray for others.</p>

APPENDIX C

CENTRAL QUESTION AND SUB-QUESTIONS

Central question

1. How do cognitively impaired young people who are a part of Christian community experience spirituality?
2. What is the essence of their spiritual/religious identity?

Sub--questions

1. What do you like about God? What do you like about church?
2. What does it mean for you to be a Christian? (What is it like to be a Christian?)
3. How can other people tell that you love God? How can other people tell that you are a Christian?
4. When is it easy/hard to believe in God?
5. How would you describe your relationship with God?

APPENDIX D

FINAL INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol: A Spiritual Identity of Cognitively Impaired Young People in a Postmodern Society	
Time of Interview:	Date:
Place:	Position of Interviewee:
Interviewer:	Interviewee:
Introduction: Brief description of the project:	
<p>1. How would you describe God? <i>Prompt:</i> Do you believe in God? Who is God? How does He look like? What is he like?</p>	
<p>2. What does it mean to believe in God? <i>Prompt:</i> What is a difference between people who believe in God and those who do not? Do you need to go to church to believe in God? Does everyone who goes to church believe in God?</p>	
<p>3. How would you describe your relationship with God? <i>Prompt:</i> What does God mean for you? What does God do for you? What do you do for God?</p>	
<p>4. What do you like/dislike about God? <i>Prompt:</i> Are there times when you are angry with God? Are there times when God makes you happy? What was your funniest/saddest time with God? Is it always easy to believe in God?</p>	
<p>5. What do you like/dislike about church? <i>Prompt:</i> What makes you like to go to church? What makes you dislike going to church?</p>	
<p>6. How do you experience God? <i>Prompt:</i> Where do you feel God the most? Do you feel close to God in church/school/at home/in work? What are you doing when you feel close to God?</p>	
<p>7. How does your belief in God influence your life? <i>Prompt:</i> Does God help you to do decisions in life? How does He do it? Does Bible help you to become a better person? How? Do people in the church help you to become a better person? How do they do it?</p>	
<p>8. If you could choose life with God or without God, what would you choose? <i>Prompt:</i> Would you always choose life with God? Would you like to be a Christian even if you would not have Christian parents/friends?</p>	
<p>9. What did we miss about God that you think is important to discuss? Is there something about church that you think is important to discuss? Is there something about people who believe in God that you think is important to discuss?</p>	

Conclusion: Thank you for participation; Assurance of confidentiality of responses;
Potential future interviews

Any other follow-up questions that will arise in the process of the discussion with the participants and in any possible follow-up interviews will remain within the framework of the study. The subjects will not be asked to discuss any other issues except of those that they have agreed to in the research consent form.

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CURRICULUM VITA

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Lea Danihelova

Education:

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 2011 – Present | Doctor of Philosophy (Emphasis: Religious Education), Andrews University |
| 2021 – 2023 | Montessori Diploma Course 6 – 12
Association Montessori International |
| 2015 – 2017 | MA in Elementary Education
Comenius University |
| 2004 – 2008 | MA in Special Education
Comenius University |

Professional Experience:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 2020 – Present | Deputy Director, Montessori School Martin |
| 2014 – Present | Instructional Facilitator, Andrews University |
| 2014 – 2020 | Primary Teacher, Galileo School, Bratislava |
| 2003 – 2002 | Special Education Teacher, Primary Schools in Martin |
| 1994 – 2010 | Translator, SDA Publishing House; International Bible Society |