

## THE MEANING OF PRAYER TO CHILDREN: EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED DENOMINATIONS IN IBADAN, OYO STATE NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *Prayer, the art of talking with God, is an activity that Christian children are regularly involved in. This study examined the meaning of prayer to children, and the differences in the meaning of prayer based on denomination, age and gender. This research was a qualitative study which employed a phenomenological design. Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development are the major theories guiding this study. Data collection methods consisted of a semi structured interview, through observations, uncompleted sentences, picture reading and letter writing. The respondents consisted of forty (40) children, ten (10) from each of the four (4) denominations: Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Catholic Church in Nigeria (CCN), Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry (MFM) and the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC). Denominations were chosen for their varied prayer practices. The respondents were grouped into two: older children aged 11-12 and younger children 7-8. Data was analysed using NVivo 11 Pro for Windows. This study revealed that the significance or meaning of prayer for younger and older children is talking to God whom they believe has the power to answer their prayers; however, He can only do this when they pray. Also it is a sequence of powerful words/phrases that they formed or set recited (known of by heart) and said (verbally and in their minds), and actions/activities that were done at a certain time or locations. The children mentioned the significance of prayer as connected to Christianity. Prayer was the very essence of life and of Christianity. According to the children, without prayer, life would be meaningless and a prayer-less Christian is a pretender. Thereby, showing once again that children get their significance or meaning of prayer from within the society they live Prayer is caught and prayer is taught, parents and denominations should be careful what they teach formally or informally to children.*

**KEYWORDS:** Prayer, Children, Conversation, mind, verbally, Mary, set- recited prayers, Denomination, God, Jesus, key, Christ Apostolic Church, Catholic Church in Nigeria, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, Nigerian Baptist Convention

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### INTRODUCTION

The Scriptures admonish us to “pray without ceasing” (Thessalonians 5:17). This does not mean that we are to spend all of our time on our knees in formal prayer. It does mean that we must live and serve our Lord in the atmosphere of prayer. Prayer is the channel of communication between our souls and God. God speaks to us through His word; we respond to Him through our prayers, and He always listens to us. We cannot weary or burden Him by our frequent heart to heart communications. “There is one God and one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus” (1Timothy 2:5). Jesus is the mediator between us and God, therefore, we must give Him our total allegiance. Only the name of Jesus Christ gives us credibility with the Father — not our education, our wealth or poverty, our church, our background or our position — only Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “If you ask anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:14). Jesus said in Matthew 21:22, “And everything you shall ask in

prayer, believing, you shall receive.” The very fact that we ask (pray) God for our needs demonstrates our faith. When we pray, answers come every time, but not always in the way we expect. There are times when God answers prayer as soon as we pray. Other times we have to wait for them to be answered. Sometimes His answer is “No”, like all good parents, He gives us what is good for us, but not what is harmful to us, but He always listens and answers.

In the last few years Nigerian children have been motivated to pray. National incidences like the kidnapping of the Chikbok girls in Northern Nigeria, importation of the deadly Ebola Virus, constant killings of people by the Fulani herdsmen, activities of the Boko Haram insurgents, kidnappings by ritualists and for ransom, economic recession and family and personal issues have are things that make children pray.

This study sets out to discover what children understand prayer to be. There have been some studies that have been conducted concerning children and prayer in Western and European countries (Moore, Talwar and Bosacki 2012; Keeler 2012; Mountain 2004; Long, Elkind and Spilka 1967; Coles 1990; Heller 1986; Stonehouse, Catherine and Scottie May. 2010). However, studies on prayer as it concerns African children is limited. This study is set out to fill the gap in literature by researching the concept of prayer that African children have.

## LITERATURE UNDERPINNING

Developmental theorists have placed the spiritual and faith development, including prayer life of children into stages. The Theory of Cognitive Development invented by Jean Piaget explains how a child’s thinking changes from early childhood to later childhood (Ratcliff, 2007, p. 225). Jean Piaget explained the process of knowing and the four states a person moves through to gradually acquire this ability (Blake & Pope, 2008, p. 59). He notes that children learn as they experience their physical and social environment. However, “these factors are cleanly limited (and to some extent determined!) by the stages of cognitive development” (Richards, 1975, p. 182). The stages, four in number, are universal meaning that they are applicable in the same order to every person no matter the culture. Also, each stage is sequential as they follow a particular pattern and they build upon one another. It is not possible to jump a stage (Invariant) and each stage is more advanced than the previous one, learners move from one degree of hardship to another (Cloyd, p. 35; Yount, p. 84). The steps are: Sensorimotor Stage (birth through 2 years), Preoperational Stage (ages two to seven), Concrete operational stage (ages 7 to 11) and Formal Operational Stage (ages 11 and above). Children start at the very beginning of each stage and as they grow in age and experience they graduate from one stage to the next, the next stage being higher and more advanced than the last.

Sensorimotor Stage: Children’s mind and thinking develop in a “slow step by step concrete manner which is tied to their immediate experiences (Cloyd, p. 35; Yount, p. 84). Children learn through the senses: hearing, seeing and touching (Plueddemann, 1995, p. 52). Preoperational Stage: Children at this stage learn with the use of symbols and the development of language, imitation and play. At this stage, a child cannot reason from the point of view of another person and cannot think in a reversed manner. Words have concrete definitions: real understanding does not take place as children tend to parrot what they have heard. In many cases they get answers right but when probed for understanding they do fall

short (Yount, p. 85-88). Children at this stage learn in an intuitive manner and they have a very active imagination. This is the period they have make belief friends. According to Plueddemann (p. 53), it is at this stage that “cars can fly, dragons can hide under the bed and moon follows them as they go for a walk at night”. Concrete operational stage: When children enter this stage they are able to sort out object in order of shape, and size and anything that makes them different. They are beginning to think in a logical manner. They are concrete in their thinking they can solve visual problems better than word ones (Yount, pp. 88-89). Children can only solve mental problems if they have experienced them. They begin to develop the skill of reasoning and they can think about two different things at the same time and can work things from the back to the front (Pullman, 2001, pp. 68-69). The last stage is the formal operational stage. This stage starts around 11 and continues into adulthood. Here, children begin and continue to think in abstract terms and their language capability has increased. At this stage children begin to think ‘outside the box’. They think of possibilities not just concrete realities. Now children can reflect on things and can think with formal logic and in a scientific manner. They do not need props or activities to solve problems as they can solve the problems with their minds (Yount, pp. 89-91; Pullman, 2001, p. 63-72).

Also the society and what children learn from the society also influences their meaning of prayer. Albert Bandura developed a Social Learning Theory, from his Bobo –doll experiment in 1961 (Davis 2013, p. 30-31).The experiment was conducted using 24 preschool children who were divided into three groups. The experimental group of children watched a video of an adult hitting a Bobo-doll and listened as he said negative things to the doll; the second group of children watched as an adult played in a non-threatening manner with a Bobo- doll saying nice things to the doll. The last group, which was the control group observed by just looking at the doll. There was no adult with the Bobo-doll. The children were later put in the same room with the Bob-doll and it was observed that the children from the experimental group learnt the aggressive behaviour as they hit the doll as well; while the children from the second group learned the good behaviour as they behaved in a nice manner towards the doll. It was also noticed that the second group behaved in a less aggressive manner towards the doll than the control group (Sincero, 2011; Cherry, 2017; Artino Jr, 2007). This experiment gave rise to the following tenets of the Bandura Social Learning Theory.

1. Learning takes place as people observe the behaviour of a model. Bandura calls this motivation “learning through modelling” (Bandura, 1999, p. 5-6). Bandura’s examples of models being: live models, which are people performing the behaviour; verbal instruction models, which involves explaining facts and descriptions of the behaviour; and symbolic modelling, which includes teaching behaviours through books, movies, radio, television, online and other source of media (Sincero, 2011, p. 3).
2. Observational Learning takes place even though the learner has no direct reinforcement. This happens as learner observes the effects the behaviour has on the model. Thus learning can take place in the absence of reinforcements to the observers. This according to Bandura is called vicarious reinforcement (Yount, 1996; Bandura, 1999, p. 24; Artino Jr, 2007, p. 8).
3. Not all learning caused a behavioural change. This is because “learning occurs by observing a thing, while behaviour is as a result of knowledge which occurs due to motivation” (Yount, 1996, p. 183-184).

Bandura explained that for real learning to take place, there must be an “interaction between personal, behavioural and the environmental factors” (Yount, 1996, p. 180). Bandura explained that observational behaviour was learnt effectively when the children pay attention to the action, remember the observed behaviour or action, can replicate such behaviour/action and are motivated (direct, vicarious and self-produced) to do such Bandura, 1999, p. 25).

The Social learning theory has been beneficial in the class room as teachers have used modelling to teach children how to behave and also warn them not to behave in negative ways. Teachers develop teaching methods that put the principles of attention gaining, retention of what has been observed, activities that bring about reproduction and give children motivation to learn (Davis, 2013, p. 30-31). The social learning theory has also been used to warn parents about the dangers of allowing their children to watch violent television films and cartoons because children will imitate them Anatsui and Adekanye, 2014, p. 60).

Vivienne Mountain did a research in 2004 *Investigating the Meaning and Function of Prayer that Children had in Six Different Schools in Melbourne, Australia*. The schools represented different faiths in southern area of Metropolitan Melbourne such as Catholic Christian, Christian Charismatic, Orthodox Jewish and Islamic faiths. Through Ground Theory methods, with the aids of interviews, and observation using video recording, Mountain listened to the voices of sixty primary school children, who were about ten years old, ten from each school. The research, which sought to discover the children’s perceptions of prayer, revealed their theological and psychological consciousness. The children in this study viewed prayer “as a way to understand life’s experience and a way to respond to life” (Mountain 2005, 298). Prayer was a way of communicating with a good God, and it could be personal. Prayer was seen as a part of everyday life and a way to cope in hard times and an activity that identifies one as being part of a religious community. It was also a vehicle that allowed for greater self-expression. From her research, she came up with the following implications:

1. Prayer should be taught in schools, homes and churches with a multi-faith awareness. All children should be encouraged to pray.
2. Prayer should be related to symbols and rituals. Children of this research knew that prayer was directed to God but they did not know the right way to approach Him.
3. Prayer should be recognised as a coping mechanism which would be useful for those in the medical science and in children’s ministries and child psychology.
4. Prayer is vital for children’s spiritual development. This is because prayer helps to develop the God image within children (Mountain 2005, 294-51).

The strength of this research was the use of ground theory method used to understand the prayers of the children from different religious backgrounds. The research methodology of the research is very well documented and can be replicated. One limitation of this study has to do with the nature of the sample which included only 10-year-olds from a middle class urban area of Australia and does not address a wider cultural experience.

The idea that prayer should be taught in schools, churches and homes with a multifait awareness may be counterproductive for the spiritual growth of younger and older Nigerian children. This is because Nigerian older and younger children due to their cognitive

development may become confused with which prayer practice is the correct one. They may even start praying in a manner that may not be acceptable in the denomination or home they belong to. There would also likely be protests from parents and bodies of the different religions. In 2015 the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), a parastatal of the federal ministry of education introduced a lot of new subjects for children in primary and secondary schools. One of the new subjects was Religion and National Values (RNV) which comprised of Christian Religious Studies (CRS), and Islamic Religious Studies, Civic Education, Social Studies and Security Education. It was noted that both Muslim and Christian religious leaders were not in support of the idea. "Let Muslims be Muslim and Christians be Christians," Nicholas Okoh, Primate of the Anglican Church was reported saying (Obiejesi, 2017).

Moore, Talwar and Bosacki (2012) conducted a research titled *Canadian Children's Perceptions of Spirituality: Diverse Voices*. This research took place in Canada with 64 participants between the ages of 6 to 11 years old. The youngest respondent was 6 years 7 months while the oldest was 11 years and 11 months. The average age was 9 years. The goal of the research was to "explore the spiritual experiences of children from different cultural, religious and spiritual orientations" (Moore, Talwar & Bosacki, 2012). The children were chosen from a database of parents interested in the research. However, the semi structured interviews were conducted without the presence of parents.

Children were asked questions such as, "why do people pray?" or "when you pray, does God listen?" (Moore, Talwar & Bosacki, 2012) Questions were asked that "encouraged the children to discuss their prayer habits and share how they felt prayer functioned in their lives" (Moore, Talwar & Bosacki, 2012). Data was transcribed from a digital recorder using Express Scribe and then coded using NVivo software. Opening coding was used and the codes were grouped into clusters according to discovered themes. Six major themes were discovered by the researchers. Listed here are the ones in relation to prayer (Moore, Talwar & Bosacki, 2012, pp. 226-227):

1. Praying to God made the children feel happy, good or better.
2. God responds to prayer directly, indirectly by helping them when they prayed. He even advices them through prayer.
3. God listens as they talk to him and that during some occasions God speaks to them with a quiet voice that they can hear in their head.
4. As they pray God comforts them and helps them go through hard times.

The nature of the sample was the strength of this paper in engaging in different religious, spiritual and cultural backgrounds. The children were also of diverse ages as the youngest was 6, the eldest was 11 and the average age of the respondents was 9. Thereby the respondents cut across all the development stages and the researchers could compare the different stages. The researchers felt in some cases the children answered in some ways just to please them (Moore, Talwar & Bosacki, 2012, p. 231). The data collection methods therefore became a limitation of this research. One issue that must be considered is that the children of this study were not all Christians and the findings were almost the same as that of Mountain'2004, who also had a mixed religious sample.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper investigated into the prayer life of younger children ages 7 - 8 and older children ages 11-12. It sought out to answer the research question using phenomenological qualitative design chosen as it helped look into meanings and perspectives that the respondents had on prayer. Children from four denominations: Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC), Catholic Church in Nigeria (CCN), The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) and Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), ages 7 - 8 years (younger) and 11-12 years (older) were used for this research as summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents from the Denominations According to Gender and Age**

Denomination	Younger children (7-8 years)		Older children (11-12 years)		Total from each church
	Gender Female	Gender Male	Gender Female	Gender Male	
CAC	2	3	3	2	10
MFM	3	2	2	3	10
NBC	2	3	3	2	10
CCN	3	2	2	3	10
Total in each gender	10	10	10	10	Total = 40

The researcher sought a similar number of each category of respondents in the overall sample, spread out across the four denominations. Therefore, ten children were chosen from each denomination thus giving a sample size of forty (40) children from the four denominations. The children were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and maintain confidentiality. It started with three initials of the church, the age group of the children Y for younger children and O for older children, 'b' for a boy and 'g' for a girl and finally a number 1-5. An example is CACYb1 which is decoded as the first boy aged 7 to 8 years from the Christ Apostolic Church. All pseudonyms can be found in Table 2.

**Table 1: Pseudonyms for the Respondents**

Denomination	Pseudonyms Younger children 7-8 years	Pseudonyms Older children 11-12 years	Denomination	Pseudonyms Younger children 7-8 years	Pseudonyms Older children 11-12 years
CAC	CACYg1	CACOb1	NBC	NBCYg1	NBCOb1
	CACYg2	CACOb2		NBCYg2	NBCOb2
	CACYb3	CACOb3		NBCYb3	NBCOb3
	CACYb4	CACOb4		NBCYb4	NBCOb4
	CACYb5	CACOb5		NBCYb5	NBCOb5
MFM	MFMYb1	MFMOg1	CCN	CCNYb1	CCNOg1
	MFMYb2	MFMOg2		CCNYb2	CCNOg2
	MFMYg3	MFMOb3		CCNYg3	CCNOb3
	MFMYg4	MFMOb4		CCNYg4	CCNOb4
	MFMYg5	MFMOb5		CCNYg5	CCNOb5

Over the years researchers interested in children such as Stonehouse and May 2010; Mountain 2004; Cloyd 1997; Coles 1990; Heller 1986; Pitts 1976; Long, Ekind and Spilka 1967; Harma 1944 and so on have interviewed children with child-friendly data collection tools such as, semi structured interviews, conversations, drawings, pictures, uncompleted sentences/ unfinished sentences, play, games and writing letters to God. This study also employed the use of different qualitative child-friendly data collection methods such as, semi-structured interviews and conversations, uncompleted sentences, picture projection and writing a letter to God. The picture reading tool used images so as to stimulate discussions, while the uncompleted sentences allowed children to answer honestly without feeling the pressure of talking to an adult. With the aid data projective test (Picture reading and uncompleted sentences) (Finaluu, 2013), the respondents were able to “reveal predetermined attitudes, feelings and emotions” (Soley, 2009). The raw data was gathered, transcribed, coded, classified and re-classified until patterns and themes that could be translated meaningfully emerged. These themes were then compared and analysed. The researcher made sure that the data collection and analysis methods passed credibility/internal validity, transferability, dependability and conformability checks. The Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) package that was used in this research is NVivo. 11 Pro for Windows.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This paper looks at the meaning, and intended meaning that older and younger children of the four denominations had of prayer. It was found that children’s concept of prayer was seen in three major ways which were, (1) what they understood about prayer, (2) what they thought about prayer and (3) what they were taught about prayer

### Older and Younger Children’s Meaning and Intended Meaning of Prayers

The research question guiding this study: *What is the significance of prayer that is held by younger and older children?*, was developed to find out the meaning or intended meaning of prayer held by both older and younger children of the four denominations under study. They were asked questions such as: What is prayer? What does it mean to pray? Also, the incomplete sentence “Prayer is \_\_\_\_\_” was used to elicit information from them on their understanding of prayer. Then, a few follow up questions were asked depending on their initial answers. This was to ensure clarity in their perception of prayer. After analysing their responses, three major sub-themes were developed.

From the findings, it established that as children explained their meaning or intended meaning of prayer, three main themes were identified, (A) How children understood prayer, (B) How children thought about prayer and (C) What children were taught concerning prayer. The first two of the three main themes were then divided into sub-themes: How children understood prayer was divided into sub-themes: Children understood prayer in terms of (1) communication or talking to God orally or in their minds and (2) asking for things. The second major theme was: how children thought about prayer. Children thought about prayer in terms of words that were good and powerful, a relationship between them and God and in terms of actions and activities. Their thoughts gave rise to the following themes under this section: (1) powerful, (2) good, (3) a relationship builder and (4) an activity or an action. The last theme is what children had been taught about prayers. The themes are discussed in a

descending order. The most prevalent theme is discussed first, then others are treated in turns in the order of prevalence.

### How Children Understood Prayer

Children understood prayer in terms of (1) communication or talking to God orally or in their minds and (2) asking for things. Table 4.3 gives a tabular representation of the themes and sub-themes discovered on how children understood prayer:

**Table 2: How Children Understood Prayer**

Significance of prayer: How children understood prayer
<p><b>Older Children:</b>  Major Themes  - None  Minor Themes  - Communication (Talking to with God Aloud)  - Asking (presenting a need)</p> <p><b>Younger Children:</b>  Major Themes  - None  Minor Themes  - Communicating (talking to God in mind)  - Asking (presenting a need)</p>

### Communication: Talking to with God Aloud or in their minds

Older children see prayer as an “opportunity,” “medium” or an “act” by which they “communicate” or “talk to” God. Talking to and communicating were in many cases used synonymously as they explained the meaning of prayer. Older children in their response to the question about their meaning of prayer viewed prayer as being more of an oral activity. To them prayer is “interacting by expressing your mind, ideas, feelings and heart desires orally to God” (NBCOg5, CCNOb5), where they ‘talked aloud’ or “loudly” using words. When CACOb2 explained the power in the words that make up prayers he said, “Prayer are words we put God’s name into to help us in our future purpose so that danger would not harm us. Anything we say with our mouth shall come to pass”. Many children believe that God talks back to them. The talking is not a monologue but a dialogue – one in which there is an exchange. CCNOb3 for example was of the opinion that, “As a person talks to God, He talks back”. In his definition he said, “Prayer is talking with God”. He noted that after talking, “I will be quiet. God talks back by saying I should not be stealing, I should not lie”. He even went on to say that, “God said that when I want to go and steal that He will talk to me that I should not steal (CCNOb3).

Younger children also believed that prayer was an “act” by which they talked with or talked to God. However, they did not use the words communication or talking to God like the older children. Younger children defined prayer, as “the raising up our hearts, minds and voices to God” (CACOb3, CCNYb1, CCNYg3). To them talking or communicating to God is done



more in the mind, or silently than it is talking orally. While prayer as talking aloud to God was a major theme for older children it was a minor theme for younger children.

Both older and younger children understood prayer as talking to or communication with God, which they did with their voice like a dialogue or within their minds. The children in this study just like the children in the study of Mountain (2005) saw prayer as communication. Older children saw prayer more as an oral activity where they interacted with God telling Him everything, their feelings, heart desires, fears, wants and needs. They noted that once they uttered the prayer words, they became powerful. They also explained that God speaks back to them when they pray. Usually after talking to God the older children keep quiet and then allow God to speak back to them. When God speaks He warns them not to commit sin. The children noted that when they talk to God they do it with a loud voice. Younger children on the other hand defined prayer as raising up their minds and hearts to God. For them prayer was more of an internal conversation with God as some children mentioned talking with God in their mind and not verbally. However, some younger children explained raising up heart and mind with routine behaviour such as closing eyes, and folding of hands. Younger children used a text book definition of prayer to define their meaning of prayer, one that they have learnt through rote learning.

Their explanation showed they knew the right words but could not explain what they meant with actions and behaviours. This could be an example of rote learning and not understanding the concept of prayer or could it be that they do not have the language to explain? This finding was in line with Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development. At this age, they fall into both pre-operational and concrete operations stages of development. They are concrete in their actions and they define prayer in terms of concrete actions (Yount 89-91, Long, Elkind and Spilka, 1967, 105-106).

Younger children of this study do not have a full grasp of language and are not able to understand abstract terms they use like "raising up hearts and minds to God" to which Gorman (1995, 146) notes that at seven to ten years children use vocabulary that is abstract. They are not able to understand the mental concepts and need examples that explain them; and can only understand the meanings if they are explained with an item.

### **Asking: presenting a need**

Children understood prayer as asking for things they need from God. This was a minor sub-theme for both younger and older children in their meaning of prayer. "Prayer is when you ask something from God" (MFMOg2). The things they ask from God can be both physical and spiritual. In the case of NBCOb1 the thing he asks from God was spiritual. He therefore defines prayer as, "Asking something from God, asking God to forgive our sins ... "While for NBCYg3 it was money. "Prayer is when you pray so that you will have money. . . . It is when you pray for something and that thing is given to you". Though a minor theme, prayer is "asking for whatever you need" NBCOb2. Children therefore pray to ask God for things they know that it is hard for their parents to provide. This could be seen by the meaning of prayer of NBCYg1 who noted that: "Prayer is asking God for something. We are asking for a house and a new car so we can live in a new house and so my mummy and daddy can have a car because my daddy's car has spoiled. Asking God for something like if you want eternal life, money or to build a house" (NBCYg1).

Prayer was solely for asking God to satisfy a need. In many cases, they ask Him for things they or their parents needed at that point in time. This was a minor theme for both older and younger children. Although they defined prayer in this way, the manner in which they prayed aloud and answered the interview questions showed that for them prayer was more than just asking. Children need to be able to think more about their definition of prayer. This should be job of curriculum developers and teachers.

### How Children Think about Prayer

When children were asked to define prayer or explain what they meant by prayer one issue that was striking as the data was analysed was their thinking about prayer. Table 4.4 shows the representation by age of the two sub-themes about how children think about prayer: (1) positive and (2) in terms of actions and activities.

**Table 3: How Children Think about Prayer**

<b>Significance of prayer: How children think about prayer</b>
<p><b>Older Children:</b></p> <p>Major Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- None</li> </ul> <p>Minor Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Actions and Activities (singing, Bible reading, behaviour)</li> <li>– Positive (good, builds relationship)</li> </ul> <p><b>Younger Children:</b></p> <p>Major Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Positive (Powerful key, master key, close relationship, good thing)</li> <li>– Actions and activities (singing, in a location, behaviour)</li> </ul> <p>Minor Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– None</li> </ul>

### Prayer is a Positive Action

The respondents saw prayer as a positive act. This was a main theme for younger children and a minor theme for older children. Under this theme were the following sub-themes, (1) prayer as a powerful key, (2) prayer is good and (3) prayer brings children closer to God.

#### Prayer as a powerful key

Children described and defined prayer by the word ‘key’ and, in many cases, the ‘master key.’ This was more common with younger children than older children and more common in MFM and NBC denominations. NBCOb2 was quick to write and to say “prayer is a key,” while MFMYg5 explained prayer as “the key in which you can communicate to God with”. Younger children seemed to take the idea of prayer being a key literally as one respondent while describing prayer as a key gave an insight into what she meant:

Prayer is the master key that breaks some locks. The master key is the key that breaks whatever the devil has brought into one’s life. It is only prayer that can break and open a lock. Maybe the devil did something to the house and you pray. Prayer can

open it. When the devil comes to your house and maybe he destroys something and you pray it would then not be destroyed. (MFMYg5)

Although she talked about doors, houses and locks, her definition showed that she believed that prayer is powerful. This belief was also held by older children. MFMOg1 and MFMOb4 described this by saying, “Prayer is the key to success” and “the key to the door of breakthrough” respectively. NBCOg3 explained this success in her definition as she said, “Prayer is the key to success because if we do not pray God cannot give us miracles”; while MFMYb2 explained that “It is the key to touch heaven.” CCNYg5 called it “the key of the people”. This belief was also shared by the few older children that described prayer as a key. Though a common theme among the younger children, however, there seemed to be some confusion as though children defined prayer as the key, some could not explain it further. NBCYb3 stated in one of his definitions of prayer that, “It is also the key,” when asked to explain, this boy looked confused, he said, “It is also the key, the master key. I remember being taught in the church that prayer is the key”. When asked again to explain further he mentioned that “The key of prayer is when you pray for something and that thing is given to you”. CCNYg5 defined prayer as “the key of people who pray to God to answer their prayer”. After a bit of prodding, she went on to say, “Prayer is key – the master of people who pray to God to answer their prayers”.

The research found that children, especially younger children described prayer using the metaphor of a key. Not just any key but the master key which was available for people to use. As the master key, prayer was powerful; it could open the doors of prosperity (success, breakthroughs and miracles). It touched heaven and brought about results. As a key, some children, especially the younger children described its use literally and in doing so they showed how powerful they thought prayer to be, especially for spiritual warfare. It was discovered that some younger children could not explain what they meant by prayer as a key and that they just parroted the term they had heard from others and could not explain further. Also, some children seemed confused and their responses did not make sense. Most of the children who noted prayer as a key were from MFM and the NBC denominations. This then goes to show that children’s level of cognitive development and the society (in this case denominations) affects the significance of their prayers. To show how true this finding was, one of the MFM leaders mentioned that, “We believe that prayer is the key to the power house of God”.

The children have a song about prayer being the key which the researcher observed children sang during the worship service. The words are as follows, “Prayer is the key. Prayer is the key. Prayer is the master key. Jesus started with prayer and ended with prayer. Prayer is the master key”. This could have influenced their definition. Prayer as key seems to be an abstract concept for many younger children and maybe that was why they could not explain it. If teachers want to use this kind of definition for children they need to find a way to associate the object ‘key’ and its functions with Bible verses about prayer. Then they make the definition of prayer concrete with actions and activities the key can do. That way, children will be able to go from the known to the unknown and within their concrete mind they will be able to associate key with prayer. It should be defined in terms of its functions and how one can use a key to enter a room; prayer as a key takes a person into the presence of God where he or she can have a relationship with God.

## **Prayer is Good and it Brings Children Closer to God**

Younger children than older children defined prayer as being a ‘good thing.’ When one younger child described prayer, her eyes lighted up and she said, “Prayer is everything to me”. Younger children saw prayer as an avenue that helped them get or become closer to God. CCNYB2 stated, “Prayer is for me to get closer to God and the devil not to do something to me”. This perspective helps them live a better life and “to be good in life”; therefore, MFMYg3 said, “Prayer is a good thing”. MFMYb3 associated prayer with healing; he perceived prayer as the thing that heals people. Prayer to young children is good because when they pray it affects their life positively and this reflects in their definition of prayer.

Prayer literally means being close to God in the mind of young children; hence, NBCYg2 defines prayer as: “Being close to God and communicating with God. You close your eyes, bow your head and put your hands together. That is how you communicate” (NBCYg2).

Her definition and observed actions as the respondents prayed showed the importance of activities and actions during prayer. This was especially the case for younger children.

It was discovered that both older and younger respondents talked about prayer in a positive manner. Prayer was an important part of life. It was good, something the children loved doing. When they prayed they were happy and it brought them closer to God. This was how they also defined prayer. They talked about prayer giving them a better life; it healed people and helped people. In most cases, it was a pleasurable activity. This is what Mountain calls the value of prayer by the children. It seems that no matter the place prayer is seen as good, something valuable and positive (Mountain 2005, Coles 1990).

## **Prayer Defined as Activities and Actions**

Children also defined prayer in terms of activities, that is the things they did and in terms of locations or times of prayer. This was minor theme for both younger and older children. Prayer was associated with activities such as, “singing,” or “praising” and/or “worshipping” God for both younger children, while the older children also included activities such as reading of the Bible. CACOb1 explained in this way: “Prayer means to communicate. To communicate means to talk to God through different ways, by praising God, reading hymns and the Bible and preaching the gospel and also doing things in church like singing in choir” (CACOb1).

Younger children also defined prayer regarding activities; however, those activities were in terms of behaviour and location. There were certain routine practices they should, or must, do that signified that they were praying. This was explained by CCNYg3 who said, “When a person kneels down in the morning, afternoon and the night to talk to God that person is praying”. Moreover, it was corroborated by CCNYb1 who explained prayer as an activity stating “Prayer is the raising up of our minds and hearts to God, when you lift up your mind, by humbling yourself in prayer. To humble yourself is to put your hands together and close your eyes”.

The findings revealed that children define prayer as activities; this may be because when they say ‘let us pray’ there are certain actions and things that people are expected to do. However, as the findings have shown, this differs from denominations. Teachers insist on children closing their eyes, making the sign of the cross, kneeling down or standing up. And so by association children believe prayer to be the actions and activities. The society, what children

learn by observation or/ and direct teaching has a major influence on children's meaning of prayer. The way African older and younger children have defined prayer is no different as it would seem from their African American counterparts as Humphrey, Hughes and Homes in their research, *Understanding of Prayer among African American Children: Preliminary Themes*, explained that half of the children interviewed defined or viewed prayer as ritualistic behaviour (2008, 318).

### What Children were taught about Prayer

Both older and younger children mentioned being taught about prayer in their respective denominations. Data analysis showed that their responses also represented their meaning and intended meaning of prayer. Table 4.5 shows a distribution of the major and minor themes within this category.

**Table 3: A Summary of What Children were Taught about Prayer**

<b>Significance of prayer: What children were taught about prayer</b>
<p><b>Older Children:</b></p> <p>Major Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sequence prayers (thanksgiving, adoration, forgiveness, intercession)</li> </ul> <p>Minor Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Other prayers (deliverance, protection, love, trust)</li> <li>- Sequence recited set prayers (Hail Holy Queen, the Angelus, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father, Our Father)</li> </ul> <p><b>Younger Children:</b></p> <p>Major Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sequence recited set prayers (Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father)</li> <li>- Sequence prayers (appreciation, forgiveness, thanksgiving, asking, thanking)</li> <li>- Forgiveness (asking for mercy, confession, forgiveness because of sin)</li> <li>- Thanksgiving and appreciation (for all He has done)</li> <li>- Recited prayers (Our Father)</li> </ul> <p>Minor Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Others (Protection prayers, offering, and praise)</li> </ul>

### What Children were Taught about Prayer

As children mentioned what they had been taught in their denominations or schools, it was discovered that they gave names to prayers. Older children mentioned prayers of "intercession"; which they defined as "praying for the poor or needy"; "adoration" which means "giving praises"; "thanksgiving" or "gratitude prayers" which were prayers for thanking God, prayer of forgiveness asking God for forgiveness of sin, and as one older child put it, "prayers of complaint". When asked to explain this prayer she said, "If we need something we should ask" (NBCOg4). In many cases older children mentioned these prayers in a kind of pattern. The prayers were not individual prayers but consisted of different parts to make the whole, thereby, defining prayer as a sequence of prayers. This was a major theme for older children. NBCOb2 explained, "I was taught to begin to pray with thanks to God, asking for forgiveness, then petition and supplication". He said:

My teacher told me that whenever we want to pray, we should first call Him by his name like Omnipotent, Omniscience, Omnipresent and so on. Then we thank Him for what He has done, then ask for forgiveness, then go to the main body of the prayer and end the prayer. She told us that when we are praying to God it is like writing a letter to God (NBCOb2).

However, CCNOB5 was a dissenting voice. He did not have any name for prayer. He said, "From my own perspective when I pray, the prayers enter the basket, God reads and answers all the prayers in the basket". Older children also had some minor themes such as deliverance prayers which CACOB1 explained were "prayers that were done for people who have gone into demonic affliction". He explained further saying, "Demonic affliction is when people have gone into bad spirits that is spirit of the devil and examples are witches and wizards". One other minor theme for older children was the aspect of recited prayers. Children from the Catholic denomination mentioned being taught different types of prayer such as, "Hail Holy Queen which is about Mary where Mary will send the prayer to God and the Angelus which is about Mary talking to God" (CCNOg1). Older Children in this group also mentioned recited set of prayers of Our Father and Hail Mary. These they learnt word perfect.

While this was a minor theme for older children it was a major theme for younger children. As younger children defined prayers in terms of the ones they had been taught off hand and said in a certain way. CCNYb2 mentioned following a sequence of recited set prayers to "worship Mother Mary" while NBCYg2 explained how she was taught to pray and the definition of prayer being: "Prayer of appreciation: thanking Jesus for all he has done in my life; prayer of forgiveness: asking God to forgive me all my sins and shortcomings; prayer of thanksgiving; asking God for what you want: like wisdom, knowledge and understanding and thanking God for answering your prayers" (NBCYg2).

Younger children also mentioned being taught about prayers of "forgiveness" or "confession" which NBCYb2 defined "as a prayer where I ask God to forgive me all my sins and shortcomings". CCNYg4 called it a "prayer of mercy". Younger children also stated that they were taught about prayers of "appreciation - also called thanksgiving, where they thanked Jesus for all he was doing in their lives". Younger children also defined intercession prayers as praying for things that they needed or wanted. CACYb3 mentioned that he had been taught model prayer and when asked to explain he said, "The Lord's Prayer".

One minor theme that was noted was that children noted there were prayers of protection, prayers of offering and prayer of praise. There seemed to be some confusion with the two prayers as CCNYg4 mentioned prayer of praise and in her definition said, "Praise is the name of a human being" and defined prayer of thanksgiving as "a prayer you say maybe when you are doing offering".

The study revealed that both older and younger children understood the meaning of prayer in the context of what they had been taught about prayer in the church or at school. They mentioned being taught that prayers are called certain names. Older children mentioned being taught that prayer consist of a sequence of prayers called thanksgiving, adoration, forgiveness and intercession. This was a major theme for them where they defined prayer of thanksgiving as thanking God for what He had done; adoration as giving praises to God; confession as saying sorry for sins committed; and intercession as praying for the needy. They noted being taught about other prayers such as protection and deliverance prayers as well. They were taught how to form prayer words off hand and learnt set recited prayers which they recited.

The learning of set recited prayers was significant to the CCN respondents. Older children mentioned learning five set prayers which were said in a certain sequence or pattern while younger children noted learning three types of set prayers in a certain sequence. All children learnt how to form prayer words.

Younger children noted prayers of appreciation, thanksgiving, asking and confession. Minor themes were prayers of protection, offering and praise. They mentioned being taught in a certain manner to first thank God, after which they ask for forgiveness, then ask for what they want. They noted being taught prayers of forgiveness and how to pray them along with prayers of thanksgiving. They were taught how to pray their set recited prayers and the sequence they must follow. There seemed to be some confusion with certain kinds of prayers they were taught as they mentioned being taught prayers of offering and praise but could not explain the meaning of them. Christian parents and teachers have great influence on what children learn concerning prayer. They are building the foundation. They should do it in the right manner. It is noticed that denominational beliefs influence what children are taught about prayer. Children learn about prayer from parents, teachers and their denomination and what children believe about prayer and how they pray is a mixture of many things.

### **The Significance of Prayer for Older and Younger Children**

The significance or meaning of prayer for both younger and older children was that it was an act of communicating with God. Children believed they are talking to “someone helping us in heaven,” “God their maker,” who is “so powerful”, who they can talk with or to about all things. They talked to and with God about their “work,” their needs; they approached Him in prayer when “feeling sad” or afraid. They talked to God about all manners of things. They praised him and thanked Him. They also asked him for things, said sorry when they did wrong and ran to him for help or deliverance.

The significance of prayer for older and younger children was also asking God for things. This was explained by NBCOG5 who said that without it life would be “meaningless”. This was because as she explained, “we pray because we need something from God. If you need something from God, without praying you cannot get it”. When they prayed, God would provide for their needs physically, emotionally and spiritually and so on.

The significance of prayer was a way of expressing their needs, feelings and desires to God which they did with formed words that older and younger children made up themselves. The words they formed were based on the patterns and sequences they had been taught or/ and the set prayers that they had been taught and know off heart.

The significance of prayer for older and younger children was that it was powerful. It was words that “moved” God to work in their lives; as explained using the metaphor of the key or master key. This view was more predominant with younger children. As they prayed, they received “the Holy Spirit who gave them the fear of God”; He also forgave their sins, helped them to be heaven-bound and also helped them have a closer relationship with God.

For some children, the significance of prayer was an activity done that shows that a person is a Christian. This was noted in the response of CCNOB5 who noted that prayer-less Christians are just pretending. In his words, “If you don’t pray you are just giving yourself a title “pretending like a Christ-like person”. This is not uncommon as participants in Mountain’s study even though of different religions, understood the meaning of a communal activity that relates to religion, (2005, 302). The only issue here is that the respondents of this study

understand, only on their own way, a manner of prayer as the right one, as it is the “ticket to heaven”. It is what identifies a person as Christian. It may then be good to ask what then do Muslim children pray? The significance of prayer was developed with the society and due to the cognitive development of the child.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The paper explores the meaning of prayer in the life of Older and younger children of four Nigerian denominations in order to discover their meaning of prayer. The findings of this research have been summarised in the following paragraphs.

Both older and younger children’s meaning of, or intended meaning, of prayer was a conversation with God. One which older children called, talking or communicating while the younger children called it raising one’s mind or heart to God. These older children talk orally to God and the younger children pray more with their minds. Both older and younger children defined prayer as a key. The key was used to show an intended meaning of power. Prayer was powerful, it brought about successes, healing, and breakthroughs; and for younger children, open doors and correction of things the devil had spoilt. Prayer was positive, it was used to ask for things that it seemed their parents could not provide. When children defined prayer, actions and behaviour were evident. Prayer was something that involved eyes, hands and body position. Prayer was also defined as a positive or good activity helping the involved person have a close relationship with God the receiver of their prayer.

Children explained that they were taught different names for prayers. They, therefore, defined prayers according to such names. They defined prayer as intercession, adoration, thanksgiving or gratitude, forgiveness and deliverance. They also defined prayers as recited prayers which they learned by heart mentioning such prayers as Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father, Our Father, Hail Holy Queen and the Angelus. These kinds of prayers were said in a particular sequence or pattern. This sequence or pattern was their meaning of prayer.

The significance of prayer for younger and older children is talking to God whom they believe has the power to answer their prayers; however, he can only do this when they pray. Also it is a sequence of powerful words/phrases that they formed or recited (known of by heart) and actions/activities that were done and said (verbally and in their minds), and done (actions/activities) at a certain time and or locations. The significance of prayer for the children was it is a relationship builder. Prayer brings about intimacy between them and God, and it is the identity of a Christian as the children noted that the person who does not pray is not a real child of God.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The age of the children also formed a challenge, as the young children (age 7) were in some cases not able to express themselves in English. Also, in many cases boys could not speak or write English fluently thus language was also a limitation. There was therefore a need to use interpreters who spoke Yoruba, the native language of the children. Instruments had to be verbally translated into Yoruba and their answers then had to be translated and written in



English. This took up more time. Some children were also shy, especially the first time of meeting the researcher and the assistants.

### **Justification for the Study**

The purpose of this study was to discover Nigerian children's meaning of prayer. This study was conducted to fill an identified gap in literature as literature on African children perception of prayer is limited. Thus this study will add more knowledge to the current body of literature and will be of benefit to people who are interested in children's spirituality, religious education, faith development of children, education for resilience and religious psychology from the African viewpoint. The denominations studied prepare their own indigenous teaching material. Therefore, this study would serve as a magnifying glass for designers of curriculum, writers of children's programmes and literature for the churches on how to evaluate what children really understand from their programmes and then to make corrections if necessary.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

As a result of this study the following recommendations were made:

1. Christian parents and other people who care for children in the family setting should encourage children to pray in the manner that they feel comfortable with, either verbally or in their minds. This is because it prayer helps build a close relationship between the children and God.
2. Children also understand stand the meaning of prayer within the limits of their cognitive ability as this study revealed. Therefore, younger children should be taught, the meaning of prayer, how to pray and things about prayer in a concrete and practical manner.
3. Older children defined prayer as a conversation with God, where they talk to Him, therefore older children should be given more opportunity to talk to the Lord with their voices in children worship and other Christian programmes.
4. The study revealed that both older and younger children understood the meaning of prayer in the context of what they had been taught about prayer in the church or at school. Hence, much care should be considered in the learning environment where children learn prayer.
5. Christian teachers of children should undergo teaching on the meaning of prayer, how to pray and the reason for prayer and how to teach children. The church should have a special program for children's teachers where they do a course on the Biblical theology of prayer and how to teach children about prayer. This will help them learn the right doctrine of prayer and correct any misconceptions they have about prayer. Doing such will then help the teachers teach the right doctrine to the children.
6. This study revealed that there were common metaphors that children used to describe or define prayer. In many cases, they were difficult especially for younger children to explain. The use of such metaphors brought about misconceptions in their meaning of prayer, especially in younger children. Curriculum writers within the different

denominations should study the common metaphors used to describe or define prayer. They should create a curriculum that is Biblically based, theologically sound, and age appropriate to teach each one of them. This will help children use such metaphors with understanding.

7. Children defined prayer to be activities they do, the location where they talk to God, asking for things and talking/communicating with God. However, the findings of this research discovered that children understood prayer in a richer way. They understood it to be a means of experiencing a relationship with God, also a means of gaining God's guidance as they listened. Children will be able to understand the concept of praying continually (1Thessalonians 5:17), because prayer will not be tied to an activity or a location but it is a constant relationship with God. Therefore, as curriculum writers define prayer in books and literatures for children, they should look for definitions that can convey prayer as a relationship with God. The common definitions of prayer as activities, asking for something, or due to location or even talking with God should be reconstructed because as this study has discovered, children understand prayer to be more than its text book definition.

### The Need for More Research

It was noticed that younger children talk more about conversation with God in their minds while the older children verbalized their prayer more. These differences in prayer practices should be explored further to see what is contributing to this change as it is unclear if it is due to cognitive development or is as a result of instructions and teachings in the church that the children are receiving. Therefore this should be investigated further.

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