

SPIRITUALITY, FRIENDSHIP, ADHD

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SPIRITUALITY, FRIENDSHIP, AND ADHD:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSION IN RECREATION

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**Abstract**

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of seven youth (5 males [3 with ADHD], 2 females; ages 8-11) who engaged in a 9-week spirituality infused inclusive Christian recreation program called the *Messengers*. The *Messengers* occurred one day a week, after school, for 1 ½ hours lead by Therapeutic Recreation (TR) college students. The analysis from the transcribed video recorded focus group interviews (pre and post) revealed the nature of positive thoughts, words, and actions of the youths' lived experience during *Messengers* with regard to a loving and caring God, faith in self and others, and realistic friendships. Based on the results, the *Messengers* program inspired the youth in a positive manner to act and speak in a caring and loving manner towards themselves, others, and God. The participants with ADHD were able to get through their issues of social struggles as evidenced by them caring more about their peers and making new friends by the end of the program. The results of this study provide a useful contribution to the healthcare and education professionals by studying the spiritual dimension through the lens of Christian faith.

**Keywords:** *Spirituality, Friendship, Therapeutic Recreation, Inclusion, Disability (ADHD)*

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### SPIRITUALITY, FRIENDSHIP, AND ADHD: IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSION IN RECREATION

#### **Introduction**

Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common childhood neurobehavioral disorders. More specifically, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2015), parents report that approximately 11 percent or 6.4 million children ages 4 to 17 have been diagnosed with ADHD in the U.S. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) describes ADHD as a pattern of behavior categorized in three areas of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that cause performance issues in school and social settings. For children with ADHD making and keeping friendships, or lasting peer relationships can be very difficult. It can be emotionally devastating when these children are rejected by their peers over and over (Barkley, 2005). If untreated with interventional therapies, the social problems can evolve into a lifelong spiraling effect. Moreover, while ADHD is one of the most highly researched areas in child and adolescent mental health, most of those studies involved medication and behavioral therapy (CDC, 2015).

Spirituality is increasingly being recognized in the research by health care and special education professionals as an important aspect of quality of life (QOL) in young people's lives with disabilities (Conner, 2010; Narayanasamy, Gates, & Swinton, 2002; Reinders, 2011; Swinton, 2002; Zhang, 2013). One area that has recently been receiving attention in the literature for children with ADHD is spirituality (Gerber, 2007; Hathaway & Barkley, 2003; Mercer, 2011). Barclay (2008) examined the fact that spiritual communities provide more welcoming environments for individuals with disabilities whose behaviors may be a challenge

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to social norms at first sight within and beyond the community. Conner (2010) and Swinton (2002) further explored the relationship between spirituality and friendship in youth with developmental and learning disabilities. Connor summed it up best as “the practice of friendship creates a space in which youth with disabilities can experience spiritual reality of being connected to God and others” (2010, p. 336). While numerous definitions of spirituality exist, this study viewed spirituality in terms of love, compassion, faith, and connecting with self, others, and God (Conner, 2010; Zhang & I-Hwey Wu, 2012).

Leisure has been identified as a place where people can perfect themselves and be inspired by spiritual values and relationships with a greater reality and creatively become more of who they are individually (Schmidt & Little, 2007). When combining leisure and spirituality, participants can enjoy themselves and connect to spirituality with ease as they connect the concepts on how faith surrounds their lives (i.e. believing in themselves, conquering their fear, building confidence with making new friends, etc.). In the early 1950s, leisure was thought to be “a condition of the soul” (p. 224). More recently theorized research suggests that leisure offers an opportunity to pursue the essence of self; highlighting the capacity of leisure to refresh and renew the soul (Schmidt & Little, 2007).

One health care profession that has a unique aspect in the ability to provide spiritually inclusive and adaptive recreational experiences is Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRS) (Heintzman, 2002; Van Andel, 1998). CTRSs have two spiritually based practice and outcome models, *Therapeutic Recreation Service Outcome Model* (Van Andel, 1998) and the *Leisure and Spiritual Well-Being Model* (Heintzman, 2002). Both of these models address the importance of the spiritual dimension of well-being through leisure engagement, including the connection to self and others. Furthermore, one of the specialty areas of the CTRS is

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community inclusion where persons with and without disabilities choose to come together to engage in recreation where support is provided as needed. Inclusive Therapeutic Recreation (TR) programs can create opportunities for friendships to evolve and spirituality to develop through this connection with others (Heinzman, 2002).

Due to limited research in TR and inclusive spirituality, it is important for CTRSs to explore ways of infusing spirituality into recreation services to maximally promote the QOL of individuals with and without disabilities (Van Anel, 1998; Heinzman, 2002; Wozencroft, Waller, Hayes, & Brown, 2012). This study was advertised to all children in the area with and without disabilities; the only participants with a known disability that enrolled were those with ADHD. The program focused on how it affected those particular participants. More specifically, since children with ADHD do not usually get along well with their peers and over 50% have significant problems in their peer relationships (Barkley, 2005), there is a need to develop programs that can link together inclusion, friendship, and spirituality. The research study included both children with and without ADHD to address their challenges through spirituality, developing friendships, and with inclusive leisure. The potential of participating in satisfying activities can lead to an ease of developing friendships. No matter what personal challenges individuals may face, spirituality involves a judgement free mindset that inspires compassion for everyone involved. Inclusion and spirituality assists with the recognition that of persons with disabilities are citizens. The most important values in human life is to be accepted, loved, and befriended (Reinders, 2011). Thus the aim of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of elementary aged youth, with and without ADHD, who engaged in a 9-week spiritually infused inclusive Christian recreation program called the *Messengers*.

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The *Messengers* was an adaptive recreation Christian ministry inclusion program that was developed by the researchers of the study. It went under review by the Texas State University-San Marcos Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. After the authorization to proceed was given, it was supported and implemented as an after school program at the Mendez Elementary School in San Marcos, Texas for 9 weeks. The agencies involved in the research project were the Texas State University College of Education and Applied Arts, and the special education school officials and teachers affiliated with the San Marcos and Hayes Consolidated Independent School Districts. This spiritual-based program was not a part of a particular church organization. The *Messengers* ministry was a non-denominational program that welcomed all spiritual and religious affiliations. The ministry blended adapted activities such as art, crafts, games, and sports, as well as spiritual character building group meetings to engage the participants in spiritual development and friendship. The recreation activities lend themselves to provide opportunities for the youth to come together for like interests, common experience, and were conducive to spiritual well-being. The *Messengers* aimed for the hypothesis that the youth with and without disabilities would experience a growth in spirituality, social connectedness, and friendship after engaging in the adaptive recreation inclusion research program.

### **Methods**

This study followed the phenomenological approach and was guided by the desire to understand how these youth experienced friendship in terms of the inclusive structure and spiritual essence of the program. The interpretive phenomenological approach put forth by Benner (1994), was used as it gives health and caring practices a means to articulate experiences of people's lives through detailed stories about actual events. The phenomenological viewpoint was seen as appropriate as it allowed for the conscious, lived, individual experiences of the

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youth to be the central source of information. Verbatim transcriptions from video recordings of interview data from two focus groups (pre and post) were executed by two trained TR college students who served as counselors. This was done to avoid potential preconceived notions of the primary investigators. A University Institutional Review Board approved the study and consent was obtained from the parent/guardians of the youth.

### **Participants**

A purposive sample of seven participants from a central Texas elementary school completed the study. The group consisted of five males [three with ADHD] and two females, all were within the ages of 8-11. For authentication of the study, the disorders of the 3 male youth with ADHD were not disclosed to the participants. For the individual demographic data of the youth, refer to Table 1. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants.

### **Procedures**

Prior to the onset of the 9-week program, a four hour *Messengers* orientation and training session was given to six TR college students who would serve as counselors. The training was based on Zhang's (2013) suggestion that professionals need to be equipped to recognize and respond to spiritual needs of children with and without disabilities. The training included behavior and inclusion strategies, spiritual essence of program activities, and practice in group processing and reflection. Two of the six were further trained on leading focus group questions and data transcriptions from the video recordings of the focus groups.

### **Intervention**

All of the participants engaged in a total of 9-sessions held 1 day a week, after school, for 1 1/2-hours. The recreational interventions included various types of spiritually infused recreational activities. Based on the works of Zhang (2013) we incorporated beauty, truth,

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wonder, and goodness into the curriculum so youth could learn about themselves, others, and God (i.e. topics of caring, confidence, connection, friendship, hope, love, faith, patience, character, compassion, forgiveness, and responsibility). Each session followed the same format: (a) 30 minute fellowship that included snack and Christian camp songs and cheers, (b) 50 minute recreation activity that tied theme to reflection, (c) ending with 10 minute closure involving clean-up and parent pick-up.

On day one, to illustrate the theme of *Character*, participants created sock puppets to represent themselves. The group reflection focused on increasing self-control, developing spirituality, and discerning between right and wrong. During the following week, *Connection and Friendship* were the themes. During this session, all of the children participated in a DJ Dance Party where they joined each other in various line dance activities. This activity offered opportunities for the participants to begin the process of developing friendships by connecting with one another through dance. Self-control and positive coping skills were taught through yoga to illustrate themes of *Confidence and Patience* during week three. Both themes provided opportunities for the participants to experience success when trying something new in order to encourage positive socialization, self-esteem, and self-worth. They were advised on how to manage their responses and behaviors to situations that may produce anger, frustration, agitation, and/or negative feelings. Miniature horses were used to represent *Caring and Compassion*. Participants received hands on experience by grooming and painting the miniature horses in relation to learning how to care for people and knowing the importance of relationships. Each day, after the activity was completed, the participants joined focus group discussions to process how to apply the themes to their daily lives. For the overall program outline of the topics and activities that the participants experienced, see Table 2.

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### **Data Collection**

Focus groups were conducted prior to the start of the program and then again at the conclusion in order to provide some context and gauge the youths' understanding of friendship, spirituality, and God. Focus group interviews lasted approximately 1 hour each and were held in the same classroom where the initial fellowship occurred each week for familiarity purposes. The interviewers used prepared questions to elicit discussion based on the works of Conner (2010) and Swinton (2002). In addition, research by Barkley (2005) was utilized to augment the questions with bright, colorful realistic pictures as these are more effective and important in helping children with ADHD. Verbal prompts and visual pictures were used to clarify the youth's responses, rather than to direct the flow of discussion (Giorgi, 2008). The focus group interviews were video recorded for later verbatim transcription.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of the analysis was to articulate the phenomenon as expressed by the youth. Consistent with the methods recommended by Giorgi (2008), individual youth data were created by transcribing interviews from pre and post focus groups onto one fluid document labeled with each of the participant's name. The questions were listed in bold and followed by individual's responses in italics.

A trained TR graduate college student served as the primary investigator (PI) and a TR college professor served as the PI's mentor. The PI and PI mentor developed a color coding guide for youth responses consisting of three categories a) positive friendship comments (green), b) negative friendship remarks (red), and c) spirituality/God statements (yellow). These three categories were selected based on the focus group questions. For clarity and consistency, quotations illustrating the themes/patterns were extracted from the transcriptions and

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highlighted according to the established color codes. The transcripts were read carefully and reread by the PI and PI mentor using a constant comparative technique to account for the initial codes and comparisons were made both within and between participant responses (Creswell, 2007). Patterns were observed representing commonly shared themes supported by quotes. The data was organized according to these patterns which led to the development of a number of themes.

Comparisons of negative and positive comments were documented and analyzed to demonstrate the overall experience of the participants. The statements were gathered from the comments about God, family, friends, faith, and the *Messengers* program. The PI and PI mentor reviewed the transcripts separately looking for connection between spirituality and friendship. They met to discuss all participants' transcripts and findings, followed by organizing according to likeness. This process was established to create a consistent and stable inter-coder agreement in analyzing and coding data as a marker that the research bias was bracketed. Another meeting was set up between the PI and PI mentor to revisit themes and confirm authenticity. Finally, researchers separately refined and searched for final themes consistently checking back with the transcripts until saturation was achieved and reduced to commonly shared themes.

### **Results**

The results document the nature of positive thoughts, words, and actions of the youths' lived experience during *Messengers* with regard to a loving caring God, faith in self and others, and realistic friendships. In general, there was an overall increase in positive comments about friendship. In addition, there was a complete elimination of negative comments in the final focus group. Most notably, Zyren, one of the youth with ADHD, stated at the end of the program "I made a friend."

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**Loving caring God.** When youth were asked to give examples on how God shows them he cares, five participants shifted their original descriptions from practical to emotional. For example, initially Ben, James, and Micah reported things such as God giving them a house, food, or money. Yet, at the end of the study they were emotionally excited and happy to know that God cares for them. Specifically, James, who has ADHD, stated “He also helps during the day and gives us hope.” In addition, at the onset of the program, James referred to spirituality as being protected by angels. At the conclusion, he demonstrated a deeper understanding by stating, “God takes care of us, he lets us make good choices, and he sent his son down.”

When the group was viewing a picture of a girl that was hurt and crying there was an overall depiction of God’s role. Susan described “God is helping the girl and then He came and made her feel better. Then she related it to herself saying, “God cares for me like my dad.” Zyren, Susan and Ben were able to expand and specified that God helps in times of crisis and he helps if we are having trouble. Ben stated “God will always be with you. There will always be someone there to cheer you up.” Susan and Karen deliberated that God lets us live here and He lives in Heaven. Susan resumed by stating “One day He will give us a chance to be in a better place.” Demonstrating a more profound insight of God.

**Faith in self and others.** When asked, “What does faith mean to you?” Micah and Martin were confused and did not respond either pre or post. However, James, Ben, and Zyren talked about faith in their abilities. Initially, James said, “Faith is one of God’s daughters. Faith makes me happy because God sends us faith. Culminating with his description of faith, “I hope you can do this because I have faith in you. I have faith to pass my math test and face my fear on the rollercoaster.” Zyren said “I didn’t know how to ride a skateboard, and I tried and tried. I still didn’t get it right, but I tried.” This validates he had faith in himself.

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In a discussion about bullying, Zyren demonstrated self-awareness by sharing, “I think it is good to be a nerd. There’s nothing wrong with being smart.” In response, another youth said to Zyren, “Just because you have glasses doesn’t mean you’re smart.” Zyren rebutted, “But I am because I learned things about bacterial science.” Other words associated with faith shared by the participants were trust, kindness, bravery, patience, opportunity, and destiny.

**Realistic friendships.** The youth demonstrated a realistic view of how to know someone is your friend and maintain relationships even during difficult times. James described how he knew someone was his friend, “They are good to you...don’t scream or yell... treat you bad. If friends make me mad sometimes I want to hit or punch them but I think twice.” Both James and Ben agreed that friends would not force them to do things that they were not supposed to do. Micah, a youth with ADHD, commented on how he knew that someone was his friend. He replied, “I think he laughs sometimes. I used to have a friend but he moved away and I never saw him again.” At the end of the program he gained the concept of making more friends by answering the same question, “They are friends if they do nice things and are nice to you.” Karen and Susan also related to Micah by sharing their understanding of friendship being someone who is nice to you versus wanting something from you in order to be your friend. Reduced from the data, were general comments about friends in terms of “you play with them... they care for you...make you feel wonderful...make you want to come to school more... decrease stress and calm you down.” In summation, when asked at the end, “What was your favorite thing that you learned from the Messengers?” Zyren, Karen, and James said that they learned to love and care for others.

### Discussion

One of the main issues for youth with ADHD is the ability to establish and maintain healthy friendships (Barkley, 2005; CDC, 2015). Our study explored what transpired when youth were placed in an inclusive spiritual Christian recreation environment. Based on the results, the *Messengers* program inspired the youth in a positive manner to act and speak in a caring and loving manner towards themselves, others, and God. The participants with ADHD were able to get through their issues of social struggles as evidenced by them caring more about their peers and making new friends by the end of the program.

The nature of the *Messengers* program provided an environment that embraced attention differences so the youth could explore spirituality, reflect, and ask questions in a judgment free zone. While the flow of the program offered clear structure we embraced Mercer's (2011), Hathaway and Barkley's (2003), and Zhang's (2013) concepts that spirituality should involve movement, action, and surprise steeped with artistic expression (i.e. music, dance) to stimulate high interest. *Messengers* also provided extra support from adults (TR college counselors) in order to facilitate connection with youth across relational difficulties so they can experience spiritual graces. Reinders (2008) is also an advocate for the right kind of activity, in the right place, with the right people as being key for all youth with disabilities to flourish. An example of a surprising artistic activity, was the magic experience. The youth added various food coloring to water followed by the TR counselor washing the color away by pouring in bleach. This symbolized God washing away sins as the water turned from color to clear. To illustrate the effect, when asked "What was your favorite activity you did in *Messengers*?" James, Zyren, Micah, Susan and Karen responded "Magic!" Indeed, God can be found in novel activities.

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In examining the idea of a loving caring God, our youth made similar statements to those discovered by Swinton (2002) from people with learning disabilities. Ben, James, and Micah reported things such as God giving them a house, food, or money. James also stated “God takes care of us, he lets us make good choices.” In comparison, Swinton reported, “God loves me and he looks after me, even when I am bad...He helps me get food...gives you friends...watches over you... and cares” (2002, p. 31). Additionally, Conner (2010) had a similar response from a youth with developmental disabilities when asked “What does God think about you? He thinks I’m nice. He is my friend” (p. 337). Overall, Swinton and Conner found that there was an understanding that God was most often expressed in the language of friendship.

There is an accumulation of opinions that suggests a connection between forming friendships and nurturing spirituality in an inclusive Christian environment (Conner, 2010; Narayanasamy et al., 2002; Reinders, 2011; Swinton, 2002). Conner refers to this as “place sharing” (p. 336). Reinders further describes inclusion as a place to go where you are treated by others with love, kindness, and respect. Purporting that perhaps what individuals with disabilities may want most of all is the gift of friendship. Final focus group data supports their findings. When asked, “What was your favorite thing that you learned from the Messengers?” Zyren, Karen, and James said that they learned to love and care for others.

Another piece of evidence discovered during the interviews was the ability of one of the youth with ADHD to self-regulate to maintain friends. James was able to control himself when he became upset with his peers and “thought twice” versus lashing out. This gives a strong indication of his ability to avoid potential rejection which is a desirable attribution of friendship. Mercer (2011) and Barkley (2005) point out that this is a big problem for kids with ADHD due

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to socially awkward interpersonal encounters resulting in social isolation, bullying, and rejection.

Faith in self and others can bring a message of hope, healing, and growth in individuals with disabilities (Zhang, 2010). In a discussion about bullying, Zyren self-identified as a nerd and equated that with being smart. He assertively stood up for himself after another participant questioned whether wearing glasses made him smart. This illustrated a potential outcome in change of behavior with regard to having and maintaining realistic friendships. This gives credence to the findings of Swinton (2002) and Narayanasamy et al. (2002) of the potential benefits of spiritual development and acceptance between peers; overcoming stigma, social isolation, low-self-esteem.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. More data would have been valuable if derived from the reflection portion after each activity to provide an additional source of data. Furthermore, follow-up questions need to be explored to explain more richly the impact of the Messenger program outside of the study. The data presented is largely descriptive and exploratory representations of experiences in leisure and cannot be presumed to represent more than that. Moreover, the study was limited in the sampling methods as the youth came from just one school and age range. A larger study with a variety of disabilities besides ADHD would allow for further implications to be drawn or extrapolated for CTRSs working in other disability populations across the life span.

### **Conclusion and Future Implications**

Within the TR literature there is limited research regarding the role of spirituality within the TR practice on improving health outcomes (Van Anandel, 1998; Heintzman, 2002;

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Wozencroft et al., 2012). The results of this study provide a useful contribution to the TR literature by studying the spiritual dimension through the lens of Christian faith. The models by Heintzman (2002) and Van Andel (1998) lay the groundwork for CTRSs to assist clients in achieving spiritual health by encouraging coping mechanisms, adapting, and overcoming obstacles in life to increase mental health function. To that end, the main goal of the models is to provide a framework for CTRSs to manifest an environment that is comfortable enough for persons with disabilities to express their individual spirituality versus repressing their beliefs. Further exploration, as indicated by Wozencroft et al. (2012), is warranted to discuss TR professionals' convictions about spirituality and how it impacts their professional practice.

The *Messengers* examined the development of the youth with and without disabilities as they were guided and assisted to engage with their peers throughout the program. The ministry provided an environment that allowed every participant to be themselves without being criticized. From start to finish, there was an obvious growth in each participant. The resolutions of conflicts between some of the youth to newly developed friendships were signs of positive impacts of the program. Observations of the youths' connections with themselves, peers, spirituality, and God was accomplished by moving from practical views to a more emotional context. At the end of the program, all participants had only positive things to say and to take away from their experiences. The participants with ADHD benefited from this Christian ministry as they discovered an outlet to learn how to have positive social engagements that could be used outside of the program.

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**Table 1**

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

PROGRAM GROUP (n=7)			
PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	DIAGNOSIS
Mike	8	M	N/A
Susan	8	F	N/A
Karen	8	F	N/A
Ben	10	M	N/A
James	10	M	ADHD
Micah	11	M	ADHD
Zyren	11	M	ADHD

NOTE. M = Male; F = Female; ADHD = Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder;  
N/A = Not Applicable

**Table 2**

## MESSENGER PROGRAM OVERVIEW

SESSION	ACTIVITY	TOPIC	PURPOSE
1	Expressive Therapy/Puppets	Character	A sense of right and wrong, integrity, and respect for standards of correct behavior.
2	Dance Party	Connection and Friendship	Positive bonds with people and institutions.
3	Yoga	Confidence and Patience	Internal sense of self-efficacy and positive self-worth. The capacity to accept or tolerate, delay trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset.
4	Miniature Horses	Caring and Compassion	Developing a sense of sympathy and empathy for others. A sympathetic awareness of another's distress with a desire to alleviate it.
5	Magic Experiments	Love	Unconditionally treating people with respect, dignity, and compassion. Believing that people have infinite worth, value, and purpose in life regardless of race, sex, religion, or disability.
6	Group Games/Bocce Ball	Forgiveness	The act of excusing a mistake or offense and letting go of bad feelings towards others.
7	Music Therapy/Drum Circle	Faith and Hope	Believing in the unseen and overcoming the impossible through hope, perseverance, and trust. Finding joy and peace about the future and in daily life despite individual circumstances.
8	Sitting Volleyball/Relay Races	Responsibility	Taking pride and ownership in one's own duties and responsibilities.
9	Pictures and Party	Closure	Bonding and maintaining friendships.

**Table 3**  
SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

FOCUS QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
How can you help someone be a better friend?	“Invite them to an ice cream party.” (Susan)
How do you know or how can you tell if someone is your friend?	“They’re friends if they do nice things and are nice to you.” (*Micah)
How does God show that he loves and cares for you?	“He made you. He takes away all of your sins if you do anything.” (*Zyren)
What does faith mean to you?	“Faith is believing in something that you cannot see.” (Karen)
What was your favorite thing that you learned from the messengers?	“I learned about love and magic. I learned how to love and care for people.” (*James)

NOTE. \*Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder