

DOCTORAL THESIS

Faith support in adolescence: a multidimensional study of Chinese Christian adolescents' experiences in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Relationship building with faith community provides support through fellowship, guidance, and the social interactions needed for emotional regulation. The support facilitates faith understanding, quest for faith exploration, meaning making, and character building. Although, past research informed on the quantitative measure of adolescent faith support, it is unable to capture the comprehensive information needed for understanding the meaning of faith support in adolescence. This study provides a new direction for understanding and describing the experience of faith support in three dimensions: understanding the meaning, process, and effect of the experience, and projects a conceptual framework for the rich descriptions of faith support experienced by Chinese Christian adolescents in Hong Kong. Apart from the objective of understanding the concept and meaning of faith support in adolescence, this study also reveals the variation in the participants' descriptions of the experience over time.

The methodology utilized is on the dimensions of self, others, and outcome of faith experience in adolescence, with follow-up data collection and descriptive analysis on the perception, understanding, and meaning of faith support. Nineteen participants, with 11 females and 8 males, participated in semi-structured face-to-face interviews between November 2014 and July 2015 (the first wave interviews). Ten of the participants (six males and four females) were interviewed between September and December 2016 (the second wave interviews), 18 months after the first wave interviews. The Chinese Christian adolescents (Catholic and Protestant) in Hong Kong were between 15 to 18 years of age. A few of the participants' faith supporters were also interviewed to examine the research questions from multiple perspectives.

The essential descriptions of the participants' psychosocial experiences and meanings attributed to faith support are: 1) faith exploration through companionship; 2) feeling loved and secured; 3) trusted relationship and resilience; 4) and emotion regulation through faith application. Narrative and descriptive analyses of the longitudinal data on the effect of faith support show a moderate change in the areas of moral judgment and meaning construct of faith development, and significant change in faith identity over time. Findings show three possible determinants of the effectiveness of faith support: (a) experience, (b) changes in social environment, family problem, and academic pressure and (c) the presence of a strong youth leader or peer mentoring for faith accountability and exploration. Participants who faced academic related stressor, moved to a new environment, and had little faith mentorship, were susceptible to changes in faith development and identity. Importantly, descriptive narratives and numerical data from this study reveal that faith experience through personal involvement tend to have significant difference in stabilizing faith identity status longitudinally through faith support.

This study draws on concrete evidence from the rich descriptions of the experience by the adolescents, their supporters, and provides knowledge for understanding the social learning process of adolescent faith support. Research implications are discussed and recommendations made for church/parish, Christian youth leaders, Christian teachers, institutions, including educational and social policy makers, on how to best support Christian adolescents' faith.

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