

# Lifelong Faith

the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation

## Journal Collection: Children's Faith Formation



**Best Practices in Children's Faith Formation** – John Roberto and Katie Pfiffner (Fall/Winter 2007)

**Being a Child, Becoming Christian** – Karen Marie Yust (Spring 2007)

**Saturated Spirituality: Creating Environments that Nurture All Children** – David Csinos (Fall 2010)

**Nurturing The Spiritual Formation of Children** – Karen Marie Yust, Brian McClaren, Daniel Jennings, and David Csinos (Summer 2012)

**Ministry with Today's Children and Families** – Dale Hudson (Summer 2012)

**Children's Faith Formation at Church and Home** – Jolene Roehlkepartain (Fall 2014 & Winter 2015)

**Starting Afresh with Children and Families** – Craig Mitchell (Spring-Summer 2015)

**Building Intergenerational Relationships between Children and Adults** – Jolene Roehlkepartain (Spring-Summer 2015)



# Best Practices in Children's Faith Formation

John Roberto and Katie Pfiffner

For the past century Christian churches have structured their faith formation programs for children around a classroom model. This approach brings together teachers and children for regular, planned teaching and learning, in settings where significant relationships take shape. Many churches still structure their children's program around the "traditional" classroom model, which looks and feels the same as it did decades ago. The books and materials have been updated, but the basic model remains. Children still sit at desks or around tables listening to a teacher, reading the Bible and/or a textbook, answering questions, and doing pencil-and-paper activities.

This model served churches in previous generations, but changes in families, society, and churches have accentuated its limitations. Consider the following well-documented limitations of children's faith formation based on a classroom model.

- Children's education remains "based on an understanding of learning as the process by which an individual mind accumulates and integrates information at the developmentally appropriate time for the mind to internalize it. Much of current practice sees learning as an activity that takes place within the individual mind of a child. In this theory learning is facilitated by some combination of input from a teacher and the teacher's arrangement of a learning environment that will cooperate with that individual child's internal cognitive processes." (Mercer, 163)
- Little pedagogical value is placed on children's experiences, and volunteer teachers are uncomfortable with children's honest discussion of difficult issues; yet children still try to engage in theological reflection on their experiences, despite these obstacles. Children are capable of theological reflection (in ways that vary according to their developmental age/stage), and adults could provide much greater support for this work through more intentional engagement with young people's experience and more deliberate provision of religious language, symbols, rituals, and other interpretive frameworks and skills. (Yust 2002)
- Children's education is structured in age-graded settings that segregate children from learning with their family and with the other generations in their faith community. Children have few opportunities to observe the next stage of development that will draw them forward and help them grow in their faith. They do not have an opportunity to see how their parents, teachers, and other significant adults express their faith through worship, service, prayer, and relationships. We know that the faith life of children is nurtured as they are embraced in a family of faith and a vital faith community.
- Children's education is "too often sequestered from the practices of the wider community of faith. Christian education is formation into identity, learned through participation in the church as a

‘community of practice’ that seeks to walk in the ways of Jesus and organizes its life and practices around the central symbol of the kingdom of God, with its reordering of power and its transforming commitment to an alternative way of life” (Mercer, 163). Too often, there is little integration of children’s education with the rest of congregational life.

Today, we know so much more about how children learn than we did fifty years ago, and the learning methods and activities that engage children today are unlike those of previous generations. We know that the world of their childhood has drastically changed, and adjustments are necessary to provide faith formation that forms the whole life of the child—head, heart, and soul. Churches that understand this shift have made fundamental changes in the way they do children’s faith formation.

In *Enduring Connections: Creating a Preschool and Children’s Ministry*, Janice Haywood describes this shift.

These (effective) churches are interested in more than activities and numbers. They want to make a significant difference in the spiritual lives of children, families, and the church, so they have moved beyond both mediocre programming and “edutainment” fads to embrace a ministry strategy that is both foundational and inviting to children and families. They have ministered to children who have grown into youth and adults as faithful Christ-followers. They have attracted, encouraged, and equipped families to be the faith nurturers of all of the family members. They have grown churches that embrace all members from the youngest to the oldest, and they have thrived.

Many churches are discovering that childhood ministry is deeply rooted in relationships. They are committed to proclaiming Bible truths and stories with integrity rather than simply providing programming that has a biblical theme. They recognize that childhood ministry is first and foremost family ministry. They have found ways to be inclusive of children in their congregational experiences rather than always providing a separate event just for children. They recognize that “family ministry” is not just providing activities for all ages of family members, but it includes providing experiences in which the whole family can participate together. (Haywood, 6)

This article explores several best practices that congregations are using to make this shift to more holistic and comprehensive faith formation for today’s children. Best practices form an agenda for action that a congregation can use to re-imagine and reinvent faith formation with children. These best practices are not a definitive statement, but guideposts toward developing more vital and robust faith formation for children.

## Best Practice I. Effective faith formation with children respects the ways children learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

---

The dramatic changes in our culture and new research into learning—brain-based learning, multiple intelligences, and styles of learning—are changing our understanding of how children learn. Congregations that are effective in childhood learning are using contemporary cultural trends and research to create and teach learning experiences that engage the whole child. At the heart of the most effective learning are these two components: creating an environment in which relationships among the children can flourish, and designing programs that are experiential, relevant, and engaging. These approaches have the following features.

- Incorporating learning activities that teach to the different *intelligences* of children. Embracing a “multiple intelligences” approach provides different ways for children to learn or “know” a particular concept, Bible story, or belief. While not every program can incorporate activities for all eight intelligences, having a greater variety of ways to learn promotes more effective learning and engages children more fully in the learning experience. The multiple intelligences identified by Howard Gardner include:
  - verbal-linguistic (word smart, book smart)
  - logical-mathematical (number smart, logic smart)
  - visual-spatial (art smart, picture smart)
  - bodily-kinesthetic (body smart, movement smart)

- musical-rhythmic (music smart, sound smart)
  - naturalist (nature smart, environment smart)
  - interpersonal (people smart, group smart)
  - intrapersonal (self smart, introspection smart)
- Utilizing all of the **senses** in a learning experience where children can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session.
  - Engaging the children in **practicing** and **performing** what they are learning by incorporating real life application activities in the learning experience. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it.
  - Having children work in small, non-competitive groups (**collaborative learning**) to discuss and process together what they are learning, to work together on projects and activities, and to practice and present what they are learning. Children are engaged in meaningful group work that requires all members to be actively involved.
  - Immersing children in **images** and the visual nature of learning. Children are growing up in an image-driven culture. They hear with their eyes. Images, art, and film are integral to effective learning today.

## Best Practice 2. Effective faith formation with children provides opportunities for children to experience and imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the Bible and Christian tradition.

---

Effective faith formation in congregations weaves together stories from the Bible (and Christian tradition) and children's experiences so children discover that "this is *my* story about *me*, and it is *our* story about *us*." Karen-Marie Yust writes, "Each new generation of congregational leaders and parents must find ways to help children discover the transformative relevance of faith stories for contemporary lives. To do so, we need to understand the developmental capabilities of children at different ages, the social contexts in which they are

growing up, and the kinds of spiritual and ministry practices that contribute to faith formation. Children come to embody the gospel story through the interplay of these aspects of personal, communal, and religious life, and there is much that adults can do to shape this interplay so that children grow in faithfulness day by day" (Yust 2007, 4).

Karen-Marie Yust tells a story that embodies so many of the practices described in the first two best practices.

*It's a Sunday morning, and fifteen children, ages two to twelve, are gathered in a classroom for religious education. They have been exploring the biblical story of Ruth, and they are enthusiastic participants in a quest to learn about this faithful woman of God.*

*The older children have spent two weeks researching the context of the story and its characters, and writing a script for the video they are about to shoot. For "homework" two weeks previous, they had consulted Bible dictionaries and multiple Bible translations to expand their knowledge about Ruth's cultural setting and the roles of women in her era. They also interviewed some adults after worship one Sunday to discover what others think about Ruth's life and faith.*

*The younger children have heard the story of Ruth's departure from her homeland and interactions with Boaz, and they have drawn storyboard murals and composed songs about Ruth's faith journey. They've selected costumes and props for the video drama, in consultation with the other members of the class.*

*The preschoolers in the group have also heard the story on numerous occasions, and have decorated large drawings of the central characters. They have imaginatively imitated Ruth's practice of gleaning wheat in Boaz's fields, examined actual stalks of wheat, and explored the connections between the popular story of the Little Red Hen and Ruth's story. Now the entire group is ready to recreate Ruth's life on tape.*

*Two fifth graders wield video cameras borrowed from members of the congregation. Children of all ages assume their previously agreed upon roles, and a sixth grader walks them through a practice run with the narrated script. Some of the younger children pantomime the joy felt at weddings, then the sadness felt by the three central female characters when their husbands die and they must figure out what to do next.*

*As the play begins, Ruth and Naomi trudge along the road to a place where they can set up a new home. Ruth goes out into a field full of gleaners (played by preschool children) and searches for scarce leftovers. Boaz directs the other gleaners to a different part of the field and encourages his field hands (a pair of second graders) to drop more stalks of wheat than usual in Ruth's section.*

*The drama continues through Ruth's flirtation with Boaz—an awkward moment for the two older elementary children in the roles, but an element they recognize as essential to the story. The wedding scene, with crowds of celebrating preschoolers and a beaming Naomi hugging Ruth, is a near-riot. But order is restored, and the birth of a child brings the children's videotaped version of this biblical tale to a close. The director yells, "Cut!" and the videographers turn off their cameras.*

*Next Sunday, the older children will use digital editing software to make a final cut of the video, while younger children design and decorate screening announcements with scenes from the story. They will invite the entire congregation to view their production after the worship service that morning. Following the screening, adults in attendance, with advance prompting from the pastor, will ask the cast and crew questions about their interpretation of Ruth's life and faithfulness.*

*When it is all over, the entire process will have deepened the children's engagement with the biblical narrative—and that of the adults involved as well. (Yust 2007, 3-4)*

### **Best Practice 3. Faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly.**

---

Children's faith formation is fundamentally about nurturing their relationships with God, and in all aspects of children's faith formation, we would do well to let children meet God face to face. Karen Marie Yust writes, "Adults cannot presume to mediate children's spiritual experiences by inserting themselves between God and children as informers, but must wonder with children about the relationship between children's personal spiritual experiences and the tradition's understanding of who God is and how God is present to us in all aspects of our lives" (Yust 2002, 15).

Effective faith formation with children provides a variety of ways for children to encounter God directly in prayer, Sunday worship, ritual and sacraments, and retreat experiences. Congregations involve children in ritual experiences—in age group, family, and congregational settings—especially involving them in Sunday worship and the celebration of liturgical seasons. Churches engage children in prayer experiences—in class, programs, and other settings—where they are praying themselves using a variety of prayer forms and techniques such as:

- silence and silent prayer
- centering prayer
- meditative prayer
- praying with poetry, art, or music
- guided meditation
- reading and meditating on Bible stories
- prayers of praise, confession, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving
- prayers of discipleship.

One model of children's formation, used around the world, that demonstrates how to create an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly is *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*. Created by Sofia Cavalletti, this is an approach to the religious formation of children that is rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. Children gather in an "atrium," a room prepared for them, which contains simple yet beautiful materials that they use. In the early church, the atrium was the place where the catechumens were prepared. For the child, the atrium is a place of preparation for involvement in the larger worshipping community.

In an atrium the child can ponder a biblical passage or a prayer from the liturgy by taking the material for that text and working with it—placing wood figures of sheep in a sheepfold of the Good Shepherd, setting sculpted apostles around a Last Supper table, or preparing a small altar with the furnishings used for the Eucharist. Older children who do read often copy parables from the Bible, lay in order written prayers from the rite of baptism, or label a long time line showing the history of the kingdom of God. (For more information go to: [www.cgsusa.org](http://www.cgsusa.org).)

"If we want to help the child draw nearer to God, we should with patience and courage seek to go always closer to the vital nucleus of things. This requires study and prayer. The child will be our teacher if we know how to observe."  
(Sofia Cavalletti)

A second model that demonstrates how to create an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly is *Godly Play*. Developed by author, teacher and Episcopal priest, Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play* teaches children the art of using religious language—parable, sacred story, silence and liturgical action—helping them become more fully aware of the mystery of God’s presence in their lives. (For more information go to: <http://godlyplay.org>.)

## Best Practice 4. Effective faith formation with children embraces the lifecycle milestones as opportunities for nurturing the faith of children and their families in the congregation and at home.

---

Milestones are significant moments in life’s journey that provide the opportunity for children and their families to experience God’s love, and grow in faith through sacred and ordinary events both in the life of the congregation and in daily life. Milestones faith formation uses four elements to shape a vital partnership between the congregation and the home.

- *Naming* the sacred and ordinary events that are recognized in the life of a congregation and those that take place in our daily lives—our beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, and rites of passage—creates rituals and traditions that shape our identities and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.
- *Equipping* brings the generations together, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and provides information. Opportunities are provided here to model faith practices for the home.
- *Blessing* the individual, and marking the occasion in a worship service and in the home, says that it is *all* about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred.
- *Gifting* offers a tangible, visible item that serves as a reminder or symbol of the occasion being marked, as well as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life. (Anderson and Staats, 6)

Through their work with congregations, the Youth and Family Institute has identified the benefits of milestones faith formation.

- Children and youth are supported in their faith through identified milestones in their lives.
- Parents and caretakers of children are encouraged through cross-generational enrichment events to grow in their own faith, and are equipped to be teachers of the faith even in their own homes.
- Elders are encouraged to share their stories and leave a legacy of faith for the next generation.
- Faith is practiced through the four keys of caring conversations, devotions, service, and rituals and traditions.
- Meaningful feedback is encouraged through the sharing of stories as a result of specific milestones. . . .As nurturing communities work together to help and support one another, over time the benefits of milestones ministry and the life of faith are maximized
- Supportive and prayerful accountability develops for one another. Milestone moments become an integral part of the faith journey, and sojourners along the way are encouraged to support, pray for, and discuss how the journey is going for a particular individual or family. (Anderson and Staats, 7-8)

Congregations develop children’s faith formation around milestones such as:

- baptism
- anniversary of baptism
- welcoming young children to worship
- first day of school
- starting Sunday school
- First Communion
- presentation of the Bible.

Milestones faith formation is a partnership between the congregation and home with programs and resources appropriate to each setting:

### Congregational Elements

- Learning program for parents and/or whole family
- Liturgy/ritual
- Prayer/blessings
- Connection to the community
- Justice and service

### Home Components

- Faith conversations
- Devotions and prayer
- Service
- Rituals and traditions

For an example of baptism milestone faith formation, see the article “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation” in this issue. For more information on milestones faith formation see the resource list for Youth and Family Institute and Faith Inkubators.

### **Best Practice 5. Effective faith formation engages children and their parents in programs that involve the whole family in learning together.**

---

There are a variety of ways congregations engage the whole family in learning together. These can be envisioned as a continuum from congregations that make family/intergenerational faith formation the primary model of learning, to congregations that integrate family learning opportunities throughout the year, to congregations that offer occasional or annual family learning programs. Here are several examples of family learning programs currently in use in congregations:

- monthly large group family or intergenerational learning programs
- monthly family cluster or small group learning programs (at the church or in homes)
- family-centered (small group or large group) lectionary-based Scripture reflection
- family workshops throughout the year focused on family faith practices, church year seasons, and/or family-focused topics
- family-centered or intergenerational vacation Bible school
- family retreats and camps
- family Bible study
- family-centered sacramental/ritual preparation programs, such as baptism and First Communion

For a model of family/intergenerational learning that is being used in thousands of churches, see the article on “Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation” in this issue.

### **Best Practice 6. Effective faith formation provides opportunities for children to practice their faith through hands-on participation in the life, ministries, and activities of the congregation.**

---

Effective faith formation prepares children to participate in the life, ministry, and activities of the church according to their abilities. It involves children in learning settings that provide them with resources—language, practices, rituals, habits—that enable them to participate with all their senses in the life of the community through worship, prayer, service, learning, relationships, leadership, and so on. This practice of effective congregations restores the connection between learning and practice—precisely what is missing in the traditional model of classroom learning, where the material presented stands divorced from the practice of faith. It also overcomes the age segregation so prevalent in churches today.

Congregations connect learning and practice (i.e., community participation) when the content of the childhood curriculum is aligned with congregational life. For example, the children’s program prepares children with an understanding of the theology, symbols, and rituals of the liturgical season, such as Advent or Lent, and then supports the active participation of children (and their families) in the liturgical life of the church. Children may be also prepared to take an active role in the actual liturgical celebrations of the season. *The key is that what children are learning in their program is aligned with hands-on participation in congregational life, and does not replace it.*

Many churches utilize a lectionary-based model of faith formation in which the content of the learning program is the Sunday Scripture readings. Here the connection is direct: what is learned in an educational program is experienced at Sunday worship. Connecting learning programs and congregational life can take many forms: liturgical seasons, Sunday lectionary readings, preparation for a congregation-wide service project, and so on.

Joyce Mercer reinforces the importance of this practice when she writes, “The central purpose of educating children for faith is the formation of identity among learners to enable their full participation in the mission and practices of the faith community. This identity includes their ability, in turn, to impact and transform the practices of that community toward ever-renewed and more adequate instantiations of good news” (Mercer, 197).

In addition to connecting learning and congregational life, children need to be recognized and accepted as full members of the congregation. There are many ways to engage children in congregational life.

- ***Sunday worship***, where children are present, active, and have a role in the worship. Worship leaders can incorporate illustrations from children's experience in sermons, prayers that reference the lives of children, and hymns and songs that reflect all ages in the congregation, including children. Children (and their parents) can take on a variety of liturgical roles, commensurate with their developmental abilities, such as reading the Scriptures, singing in the choir, presenting a biblical drama, decorating the worship space with art, greeting people, collecting the offering, and so on.
- ***Intergenerational learning***, where children can engage in faith conversations and storytelling with more experienced members of the congregation, and learn from the Scriptures and the Christian tradition together with people of all ages.
- ***Community-wide service***, in which children participate with adults in responding to those in need in the community, caring for the environment, visiting the sick or homebound, and so on; and congregational action for justice, in which children and adults raise money to support justice organizations or take a stand on an important social issue.
- ***Teaching programs***, where older children can be engaged in teaching younger children, reading stories, leading activities, and so on.

Most often children are capable of taking on more responsibility than we are willing to give them. They can serve as ushers and greeters, welcoming people into the assembly and helping to take up the collection. They can sing in choirs, both children's choirs and other groups that help to lead music. A real sense of leadership can develop in older elementary-age children as they stand in front to sing with the adults they are so used to watching. This also helps foster the understanding that children aren't there to "perform" when they sing, but rather are there to help lead. Too, there are times

when a child's voice reading the welcome or prayers of petition would be a nice change.

Participation in a number of service areas allows for great opportunities of growth. At one church families signed up to cook and serve a meal at a Catholic Worker House in a nearby town during Lent. They gathered together, children and parents, to prepare the food, and then shared in the experience of serving and eating with those who were coming for a hot meal that evening. The children were not just bystanders watching their parents, but rather fully engaged according to their capabilities, sharing their gifts. This shared experience gave them a starting point for faith conversations about our responsibility to help those in need.

It is important to remember that "children are not only shaped by practices in which they participate. They also 'act back' on the community of practice, with new insights, ideas, and actions that can contribute to the transformation of those practices, and therefore, of the community. For example, children in one congregation mobilized their congregation to use fair trade coffee at the church after studying the situation of coffee producers alongside their reading and reflection on various prophetic texts concerned with justice and land. Adults changed their practice to hone the insights and wisdom of children" (Mercer 202).

It is essential that a community continually assess children's involvement in the congregation so as not to lose sight of this essential element of effective faith formation. Joyce Mercer suggests questions for congregational reflection.

- How are children participating?
- What can we do to better enable the participation of children? What kinds of reflection, instruction, and study in conjunction with this practice would best assist children of different ages and abilities to learn?
- And in evaluating practices as sites for learning, what did children's participation teach or contribute to the community's practice and understanding in this particular instance? How are we as a whole changed by the presence and participation of children? (Mercer 202)

A principal factor to the ongoing religious development of a child is that they feel a real sense of belonging as they are now, not for who they might become, and to know they are a treasured part of a faith community where learning and growing in relationship with God is a lifelong process.



## Conclusion

---

It goes without saying that an essential practice for making the six best practices effective is that *congregations dedicate significant resources—space, people, finances, programs—to a wide array of children’s faith formation activities*. Further, congregations must not limit the resources allocated to children’s ministries to a single area, such as the purchase of educational materials, but instead supply resources for children’s ministries throughout the life of the congregation. Not all of these resources are monetary. They also include the personal and communal commitments of time, skills, and energy invested in children and children’s ministry.

### Works Cited

- Anderson, David, and Linda Staats. “Introduction.” *Milestones Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation*. Bloomington, MN: The Youth and Family Institute, 2007.
- Haywood, Janice. *Enduring Connections: Creating a Preschool and Children’s Ministry*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007.
- Mercer, Joyce Ann, Deborah L Matthews, and Scott Walz. “Children in Congregations: Congregations as Contexts for Children’s Spiritual Growth.” *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*. Donald Ratchiff, editor. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004.
- Yust, Karen Marie. “Being a Child, Becoming a Christian—The Faith Formation of Children.” *Lifelong Faith* Volume 1.1, Spring 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Theology, Educational Theory, and Children’s Faith Formation: Findings from the *Faith Formation in Children’s Ministries* Project.” Presentation at Religious Education Association, 2002.
- Yust, Karen Marie, and Aostre N. Johnson, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, editors. *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World’s Religious Traditions*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006.

## Web Sites

- [www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org](http://www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org) – the web site for the Youth and Family Institute with resources for milestones ministry, training services, publications, and family and congregational resources.
- [www.faithink.com](http://www.faithink.com) – the web site for Faith Inkubators with intergenerational and family programs, Stepping Stones milestones faith formation, and training services.
- [www.cgsusa.org](http://www.cgsusa.org) – the web site for *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*.
- [www.childspirituality.org](http://www.childspirituality.org) – the web site for Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives with information about the Children’s Spirituality conference, highlights from the conference, resources, and web links.
- [www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org](http://www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org) – the web site for The Center for Spiritual Development (Search Institute) with news, research, and resources on the Center’s global initiative on the research and practice of spiritual development.
- <http://godlyplay.org> – the web site for *Godly Play* and The Center for the Theology of Childhood, which serves children and families directly through training and education of teachers in the Godly Play method. The Center participates in research and writing about the spirituality of children and maintains a membership network.

---

## Coming in 2008

### Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices

Holly Catterton Allen, Editor

This collection of 23 essays from the 2006 Children’s Spirituality Conference is organized into three sections:

- Part One: Definitional, Historical, and Theological Issues Regarding Children’s Spiritual Development
- Part Two: Best Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Development
- Part Three: Facing the Challenges for the Future

For more information about the book go to:  
<http://childspirituality.org/conference/contents.htm>

## Practice Ideas

# Planning for Children's Faith Formation

---

*Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, "Best Practices in Children's Faith Formation," to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with children in your congregation.*

**Best Practice 1. Effective faith formation with children respects the ways children learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.**

- Examine each of your congregation's educational programs and resources for children to determine how well they utilize the characteristics of learning today.
  - Incorporating activities that teach to the different intelligences of children.
    - verbal-linguistic
    - logical-mathematical
    - visual-spatial
    - bodily-kinesthetic
    - musical-rhythmic
    - naturalist
    - interpersonal
    - intrapersonal
  - Utilizing all of the senses in a learning experience where children can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session.
  - Engaging the children in practicing and performing what they are learning by incorporating real life application activities in the learning experience.
  - Having children work in collaborative learning groups to discuss and process together what they are learning, to work together on projects and activities, and to practice and present what they are learning.
  - Immersing children in images and the visual nature of learning.
- How can these programs and resources be strengthened and/or re-designed to address the characteristics of effective learning today?

**Best Practice 2. Effective faith formation with children provides opportunities for children to experience and imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the Bible and Christian tradition.**

- Examine each of your congregation's educational programs and resources for children to determine how well they weave together stories from the Bible (and Christian tradition) and children's experiences so children discover that "this is *my* story about *me*, and it is *our* story about *us*."
- How well do the educational programs and resources guide children in discovering the relevance of the faith stories for their lives?
- How can these programs and resources be strengthened and/or re-designed to so that children make the faith story their story and see the relevance of the Christian faith for their lives today?

**Best Practice 3. Faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly.**

- How does your congregation and faith formation efforts let children meet God face to face? What types of spiritual experiences does your church provide for children (e.g., prayer, Sunday worship, liturgical seasons, ritual celebrations, retreats)?
- How does your faith formation with children engage them in practices and a variety of prayer forms and techniques:
  - silence and silent prayer
  - centering prayer
  - meditative prayer
  - praying with poetry, art, or music
  - guided meditation

- reading and meditating on Bible stories
- prayers of praise, confession, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving

- How can your congregation expand its current efforts or initiate new efforts to allow children to encounter the living God directly?

#### Best Practice 4. Effective faith formation with children embraces the lifecycle milestones as opportunities for nurturing the faith of children and their families in the congregation and at home.

- How does your congregation currently provide faith formation around milestone events in the lives of children and their families? For example: baptism, anniversary of baptism, welcoming young children to worship, first day of school, starting Sunday school, First Communion, and presentation of the Bible.
- How does your congregation currently 1) prepare children and their families for a milestone, 2) celebrate or remember the milestone, and 3) provide follow-up after the milestone? How does your church provide congregational activities and home resources for each milestone?
- What does your congregation need to do to strengthen its current approach to milestones faith formation?
- What are one or two new milestones around which your church can develop faith formation?

#### Best Practice 5. Effective faith formation engages children and their parents in programs that involve the whole family in learning together.

- What types of family and/or intergenerational learning programs does your congregation offer children and their families? When are they offered? What are the topics or themes addressed?
- How can your congregation expand the opportunities for the whole family to learn together?

- monthly large group family or intergenerational learning programs
- family workshops through the year focused on family faith practices, church year seasons, and/or family-focused topics
- family cluster or small group learning programs
- family-centered or intergenerational vacation Bible school
- family-centered (small group or large group) lectionary-based Scripture reflection
- family retreats and camps
- family Bible study
- family-centered sacramental/ritual preparation programs

#### Best Practice 6. Effective faith formation provides opportunities for children to practice their faith through hands-on participation in the life, ministries, and activities of the congregation.

- How and where are children currently participating in the life, ministries, and activities of the whole congregation? Identify the settings and ways they are already involved?
- How does your congregation recognize and accept children as full members of the congregation with roles and responsibilities?
- How do educational programs and resources for children provide them with resources—language, practices, rituals, habits—that enable them to participate with all their senses in the life of the community through worship, prayer, service, learning, relationships, leadership, and so on?
- How well does what children are learning in educational programs connect to hands-on participation in congregational life?
- What can your church and children's faith formation do to better enable the participation of children in congregational life? How can existing educational programs be re-designed to prepare children?
- What are one or two new initiatives that your church can develop to more fully involve children in congregational life, and prepare them for this participation?



## Being a Child, Becoming Christian

---

Karen Marie Yust, Ph.D.

**I**t's a Sunday morning, and fifteen children, ages two to twelve, are gathered in a classroom for religious education. They have been exploring the biblical story of Ruth, and they are enthusiastic participants in a quest to learn about this faithful woman of God.

The older children have spent two weeks researching the context of the story and its characters, and writing a script for the video they are about to shoot. For “homework” two weeks previous, they had consulted Bible dictionaries and multiple Bible translations to expand their knowledge about Ruth’s cultural setting and the roles of women in her era. They also interviewed some adults after worship one Sunday to discover what others think about Ruth’s life and faith.

The younger children have heard the story of Ruth’s departure from her homeland and interactions with Boaz, and they have drawn storyboard murals and composed songs about Ruth’s faith journey. They’ve selected costumes and props for the video drama, in consultation with the other members of the class.

The preschoolers in the group have also heard the story on numerous occasions, and have decorated large drawings of the central characters. They have imaginatively imitated Ruth’s practice of gleaning wheat in Boaz’s fields, examined actual stalks of wheat, and explored the connections between the popular story of the Little Red Hen and Ruth’s story. Now the entire group is ready to recreate Ruth’s life on tape.

Two fifth graders wield video cameras borrowed from members of the congregation. Children of all ages assume their previously agreed upon roles, and a sixth grader walks them through a practice run with the narrated script. Some of the younger children pantomime the joy felt at weddings, then the sadness felt by the three central female characters when their husbands die and they must figure out what to do next.

As the play begins, Ruth and Naomi trudge along the road to a place where they can set up a new home. Ruth goes out into a field full of gleaners (played by preschool children) and searches for scarce leftovers. Boaz directs the other gleaners to a different part of the field and encourages his field hands (a pair of second graders) to drop more stalks of wheat than usual in Ruth’s section.

---

**Karen Marie Yust, D. Theol.** is associate professor of Christian education at Union Theological Seminary & Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, VA. Her work focuses on the spiritual formation of persons across the life-span and in a variety of roles and settings. Her major publications include *Attentive to God*, which proposes an alternative strategy for adult faith formation and leadership development; *Real Kids, Real Faith*, which opens a dialogue with parents about spirituality in the home; an edited volume, *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World’s Religions*; and *Taught by God*, which explores the relationship between transformational learning theories and classical spiritual practices.

The drama continues through Ruth's flirtation with Boaz—an awkward moment for the two older elementary children in the roles, but an element they recognize as essential to the story.

The wedding scene, with crowds of celebrating preschoolers and a beaming Naomi hugging Ruth, is a near-riot. But order is restored, and the birth of a child brings the children's videotaped version of this biblical tale to a close. The director yells, "Cut!" and the videographers turn off their cameras.

Next Sunday, the older children will use digital editing software to make a final cut of the video, while younger children design and decorate screening announcements with scenes from the story. They will invite the entire congregation to view their production after the worship service that morning. Following the screening, adults in attendance, with advance prompting from the pastor, will ask the cast and crew questions about their interpretation of Ruth's life and faithfulness.

When it is all over, the entire process will have deepened the children's engagement with the biblical narrative—and that of the adults involved as well.

Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann has suggested that nurturing children's spirituality requires faith communities to weave together biblical stories and children's experiences so children discover that "this is *my* story about *me*, and it is *our* story about *us*" (Brueggemann, 31). Anne Streaty Wimberly advocates a similar approach, and because of her involvement with African American churches, she points as well to the power of cultural stories and testimonies to shape children's faith in conjunction with biblical and personal stories (Wimberly, 13).

Each new generation of congregational leaders and parents must find ways to help children discover the transformative relevance of faith stories for contemporary lives. To do so, we need to understand the developmental capabilities of children at different ages, the social contexts in which they are growing up, and the kinds of spiritual and ministry practices that contribute to faith formation. Children come to embody the gospel story through the interplay of these aspects of personal, communal, and religious life, and there is much that adults can do to shape this interplay so that children grow in faithfulness day by day.

hungers. If their primary caregivers go away and reliably return time and again, they begin to hold an image of those persons even when their loved ones are out of sight. If they touch and mouth an object over and over again, they discover it remains soft and squishy (or hard and noisy, or squeaky and knobby). They may not have the language to describe their experiences for us, but they have an internal sense of what is familiar and what violates the norms of their world.

Therefore, infants and toddlers call us to practice Christian hospitality with them. Their status as dependent "strangers" in adult-oriented societies and faith

## Each new generation of congregational leaders and parents must find ways to help children discover the transformative relevance of faith stories for contemporary lives.

### Infants and Toddlers

Very young children spend all of their waking hours taking in sensations and information from the world around them. They are learning about the permanence of objects, the trustworthiness of relationships, and the reliability of perceptions. Every interaction provides a bit more data about how the world works. If they cry and someone picks them up and comforts them, they learn that relationships of care and compassion are part of the world. If they are fed regularly, they discover that the world is a place that meets their

communities means that they can thrive only if we choose to extend our abundant resources and goodwill to them. We control the human capital of love, compassion, and care that young children so desperately need if they are to experience God's love for them through their interactions with God's people. Few Christians would begrudge a baby these things, and yet we may not be aware of the many ways in which some social practices of childcare diminish children's experiences of these crucial elements.

As a parent of three, I appreciate the many useful pieces of baby equipment that manufacturers have

developed over the years to make parenting easier. But I wonder if a child who spends much time tucked into a plastic baby carrier experiences human care differently than a child whose primary experiences are of being carried in human arms or wrapped close to a caregiver's body. For infants and toddlers, it is the bodily sensations that signal what is real and what should be expected from the world. When we think about Christian hospitality at home and among the faith community, we need to attend to the bodily sensations our practices evoke, so that we can teach young children about the depths and breadth of a gospel hospitality built on the stories of Jesus' healing touch and hands-on blessings.

We also control very young children's access to the central activities of our life together as Christians. In order for them to see, hear, taste, touch and smell what it means to be part of a Christian community, we must invite them to participate in congregational worship and outreach. Their dependence on us requires that we practice hospitality by bringing them to church and taking them with us to food pantries, homeless shelters, and hospice rooms. Otherwise, their earliest experiences of the faith community are restricted to segregated group care in the church nursery, which, however well done, cannot begin to imitate the depth and breadth of

Christian community. To avoid overburdening parents with the task of always negotiating between their own desire to worship and the needs of their young children for uninterrupted care, congregations might pair families with other adults who will take turns holding and walking little ones around the perimeter of the church during worship. Glassed "cry rooms" with audio feeds of the service also offer hospitality to unhappy infants and their stressed parents. Some congregations are providing cushioned play spaces in a corner of the church where young children and caregivers can participate in the liturgy without being cramped in a pew. How we welcome very young children into worship is variable; that we welcome them is an essential aspect of practicing a hospitable faith.

Contrary to popular belief, infants and toddlers also have the capacity for short- and long-term memory, so what is out of sight may not be entirely out of mind. Psychologist Patricia Bauer cites studies that demonstrate a capacity for forming memories in children as young as six months and a rudimentary system for storing memories in nine month olds (Meredith, 2). She finds that infants whose parents tell stories to them develop memory-making skills more quickly than other young children. Encouraging toddlers to tell their own stories, even if most of these stories come out in gestures and

unintelligible sounds, also builds memory capacity and memory-making skills. Bauer hypothesizes that this is the case because adult-child storytelling sessions involve children in "thinking about the past" in a kind of rehearsal of memories based on their experiences of the world around them (Meredith, 2).

Telling biblical stories and narratives of Christian spiritual practices, then, contributes to young children's generation of faith memories. Overhearing Scripture read and prayers said at liturgy contributes to these memories, as does regularly hearing about God and God's people from a children's story Bible or the Scriptures themselves. Repeating the story of a child's baptism roots that experience in the child's memory more firmly each time it is told, until the child may not be able to distinguish between what is known firsthand and known because of the telling.

The best-selling children's book, *On the Day You Were Born*, links a child's birth to a holy event that can come to exist, through the reading of the story, as a "real" moment in the child's memory. Carol Wehrheim's colorful board books for infants and toddlers share the gospel message in simple words and pictures, and Ralph Milton's *A Family Story Bible* provides more details for a child's religious memory landscape. Characters and the flow of events implant themselves in the young child's mind as persons and experiences alongside their personal stories of daily life, weaving them together in their similarities and intriguing the child through their differences. The goal of storytelling with this age is not rational understanding, but providing plenty of material with which children can populate their

**In order for young children to see, hear, taste, touch and smell what it means to be part of a Christian community, we must invite them to participate in congregational worship and outreach.**

inner life and through which they can begin to interpret their environment.

Infants and toddlers also have an amazing ability to focus their attention on interesting objects in a form of rudimentary contemplation. Think, for example, of how an older baby plays with a favorite rattle: looking, shaking, mouthing, dropping, looking, picking up, banging, looking, mouthing, shaking, and looking some more. I have videotape of my daughter, at six months, playing happily with a set of plastic keys for over ten minutes and, at thirteen months, spending almost twenty-five minutes climbing on and sliding down a slide she had never seen before that day. Both the familiarity of keys as representative of something she regularly saw her caregivers using and the novelty of the slide and the sensations created by playing on it captured and held her attention.

The rituals of religious communities thus hold great potential for attracting young children's interest. If an older baby or toddler watches the ritual action of Eucharist at weekly liturgy, might not that child find a small, unbreakable chalice an object of interest? The chalice, like mommy's keys, is a familiar object that clearly has significance in the faith community, and thus, it is likely to provoke curiosity in children who witness its use regularly. For toddlers learning to drink from a cup, it is even more intriguing because people use it for the same purpose but in a different context from a high chair or dining table. Children wonder about the identity and use of common objects, and we can encourage this early form of contemplation by providing child-friendly access to items used in our religious rituals.

The cycle of the liturgical year also offers contemplative possibilities for young children. The lighting of Advent candles, the pageantry of Palm Sunday, and the waving of red streamers on Pentecost are a break in the usual worship routine. The novelty of these events attracts children's attention if they have been regular participants in more ordinary services of worship. Like a new slide, they offer opportunities to experience something different in the safety of a familiar context. Infants will follow the unexpected with their eyes, while toddlers will want to reenact the candle lighting, may squeal to march along in the palm parade, and wave their streamers with gusto once they figure out how to do so. "Agin', mommy, agin'," I heard a toddler cry after circling the church with his palm, and the obliging worship leader who overheard him signaled to the pianist to repeat the processional song so the congregation might go around one more time. This is childhood immersion in the reality of our faith, a form of contemplating who and whose we are from the inside of the Christian story.

## Preschoolers

Children ages three to five continue to experience God and stories about God in the ways they have since birth, but they also exhibit new developmental capabilities for interpreting the relationship between faith stories and their personal stories. By this point in life, their keen observational powers have provided them with a fairly accurate perception of the basic structures of social systems. They know that bigger and older persons

have more power than smaller, younger people. They realize that certain words and actions elicit predictable responses. They anticipate the routines of various social settings (e.g., home, preschool or daycare, church, a grandparent's house) and can negotiate competently among the variety of rules and expectations represented by these familiar systems. They use what they have observed about the world as material for pretend play.

But because they are magical thinkers, preschool children are not bound by what they observe. They have active imaginations that allow them to reconstruct their observations in creative ways, turning an encounter with a grumpy store manager into a fantasy of a potential bogeyman, or an aunt's wedding ceremony into a princess's ball. When they tire of a particular fantasy, they can create a new one, using other material from their environment.

We can encourage the faithfulness of preschool children by nurturing both their observational skills and their imaginative play. They need regular opportunities to witness their faith community in action, which means they need to spend time every week in worship and in the midst of a congregation's activities. They need to hear the vocabulary and see the symbols of their faith tradition used frequently so they can identify the particular structures and practices that characterize this social system and distinguish it from other social settings in their lives. They need opportunities to explore the environment where they worship, learn, and serve, and chances to ask questions about objects used in worship and images in stained glass windows. They need our permission to participate in and reenact the

## We can encourage the faithfulness of preschool children by nurturing both their observational skills and their imaginative play.

many activities that constitute our life together as God's people.

Imagine for a minute that we want preschoolers to have the same kind of knowledge and experience of religious tradition as they have of the worlds of *Sesame Street*, *Dragon Tales*, or *Dora the Explorer*. How have they acquired their comprehensive understanding of these television worlds? Most preschoolers spend an hour or more a day watching their favorite characters on cable or DVD, play daily with toys based on these popular shows, and sing along with recordings of these characters' signature songs. They listen to books featuring these characters as bedtime stories and wear clothes depicting the characters or imitating their signature styles. We might say that they are immersed in the culture of *Sesame Street* or whichever other show fascinates them. Because of this immersion, they can enter into this fantasy world, create imaginative relationships with its characters, and participate competently in its life.

Sadly, preschoolers rarely have the opportunity to immerse themselves in religious communities in a similar way, particularly in more mainstream and liberal traditions. The busy schedules of many families preclude regular church attendance, and even parents who commit to weekly participation often limit their involvement to an hour on Sunday mornings. Aside from Noah's Ark toy sets, there are few widely available biblical playthings. Some

religious clothing options exist, but they typically depict religious slogans or other written text rather than characters or scenes from Scripture. The exceptions are toys and clothing connected to popular religious video series, such as *Veggie Tales* or *Bibleman*, but these items point to imaginative religious worlds rather than to the Bible and the Christian community itself. They are fun, but insufficient for preschool faith formation.

Rather than resign ourselves to this situation, religious leaders can seek to increase the amount of exposure preschoolers have to the world of their faith tradition. Computer graphics software, color printers and transfer paper make designing church t-shirts for children a snap. Children's religious book sales (by consignment or through a local bookseller) or the regular gifting of families with age-appropriate faith storybooks increase preschoolers' access to stories from the Bible. Intergenerational events, such as Advent and Lenten workshops, which help parents celebrate these seasons at home, create additional opportunities for preschoolers' immersion in a religious world. Parent-child playgroups oriented around biblical storytelling, imaginative games and songs, and concrete advice for Christian parenting provide both experiences of religious culture and modeling for parents as religious leaders in the home. A high quality weekday preschool program with an explicitly religious curriculum can meet family daycare needs and also

immerse preschool children in their tradition's stories and practices Monday through Friday. At-home parents might welcome regular mission activities, story hours, craft projects, or other parent-child activities that make the religious world visible for preschoolers.

As we draw preschoolers further into the world of our faith tradition, we must appeal to their imagination by inviting them to engage in pretend play with the stories, symbols, and practices of the Christian community. Sometimes this pretend play can be structured by teachers and parents, e.g., planned reenactments of biblical stories (such as the story of Ruth described in the opening of this article), rehearsals of nativity scenes, and imitations of eucharistic or baptismal celebrations. Other times, we can provide children with a story or experience and the means for pretend play and let them move in that direction as they are inspired.

The Godly Play model of religious education incorporates this more informal approach. Children may use their response time following storytelling to recreate biblical tales they have heard using the wooden and felt story sets that are part of the curriculum. Even without the Godly Play approach, we can stock church school and play rooms with costume materials (such as varied lengths of cloth from discount fabric bins and elastic headbands) and evocative props, e.g., water tables with boats, figurines, plastic fruit netting, and plastic fish for reenacting stories of Jesus and the disciples at sea; sand boxes or tables with figurines, animals, sticks, and stones for recreating Exodus adventures; a small tent for traveling stories; and dolls dressed in biblical costumes (Yust, 37-38).



## Younger Elementary Age Children

Children between the ages of six and eight are fascinated by religious stories in a different way from their younger friends. Because they are learning to read and write, they want to know more about the construction of stories. They pay greater attention to the development of characters and the organization of the narrative because they better understand the mechanics and challenges of good storytelling. But like younger children, their own egocentric view of the world has tremendous power to shape their interpretations of the gospel and Christian living. They work with data they have gathered from their world and then either find one-to-one correspondences between faith stories and their lives or imaginatively weave the two together according to various ideas they've picked up from their environment. Through this process they are developing the critical thinking skills necessary to genuinely question ideas, comprehend the logic of religious practices, and investigate the implications of being faithful for all of their actions.

The theological reflections of this age group can be fascinating because they are genuinely interested in interpreting the old, old story in new and contemporarily significant ways. An eight year old once explained to me that Jesus was crucified because people "forgot to use their words" instead of their hands when they became angry. She suggested that if people "had just taken a timeout," everyone would have cooled off and given Jesus another chance to explain what he meant by his teachings. Her theological thinking incorporated

her personal experiences with the common disciplinary practice of "timeout" (used by her mother and her school teachers), details from a recent retelling of the events of Holy Week, and her own ingenious integration of personal and biblical narratives into a meaningful explanation of the crucifixion. She concluded from this reflection that timeouts really could be important to relationship-building, since forgetting to use one's words can have disastrous consequences for everybody.

repeating their words when they realize their minds have started to drift into other thoughts.

Beginning with just a minute or two of centering prayer, most children this age can move toward extended periods of quiet contemplation. Quaker elementary schools cultivate twenty to thirty minute periods of silence in children as young as four by slowly increasing the amount of time spent in centering prayer or related contemplative practices. Children shaped by such experiences of ritual

**The challenge for congregational leaders with this age group is to step out of our customary role as arbiters of faith concepts and moral points, and make room for younger elementary children to encounter the living God more directly through their own practices of theological reflection and contemplative prayer.**

Her insight led me to share with her and several other children the practice of centering prayer as a means of taking a spiritual timeout to be with God. Younger elementary age children appreciate the simple structure of this ancient prayer practice. They are capable of selecting a simple word or phrase as a centering device and repeating that word or phrase slowly over and over again as they let their bodies relax. Six year olds sometimes need to whisper their chosen words, much like they move their lips while reading. Seven and eight year olds can usually repeat the words silently in their heads. They are often gentler with themselves than adults, willing to accept that distractions occur and to move easily back to

silence often miss these quiet times when they move out of the Quaker school environment and into a more conventional school setting. My kindergarten through second grade church school class complained about my periodic absences for the same reason: their substitute teacher didn't know how to practice silence with children and so would skip that practice each week she filled in for me.

Another prayer form younger elementary children can embrace is pausing to acknowledge God's presence in the world on a regular basis. This simple spiritual practice involves selecting a repetitive sound or event in one's day and then, whenever that sound or event occurs, stopping one's activity for a

moment to take note of God's presence. The common practice of saying grace before meals is an example of such acknowledgement, but practicing the presence of God is best extended to encompass other elements of the child's day. The signal might be a ringing sound, such as an alarm clock, telephone, or passing bell between periods at school. It might be a stop sign or red light, the sight of an airplane flying overhead, or the sound of a favorite song.

We can encourage children to pick anything that regularly occurs in their lives and ask them to develop a short (one sentence) prayer they will repeat whenever that signal occurs. Children I've known have prayed, "Thank you, God, for being here" each time they heard a bird singing and "God, you're amazing!" each time they saw someone riding a scooter. Because they get to choose the signal and the prayer, they are learning to take responsibility for cultivating a personal prayer life while acknowledging regularly God's nearness and activity in the world.

The challenge for congregational leaders with this age group is to step out of our customary role as arbiters of faith concepts and moral points, and make room for younger elementary children to encounter the living God more directly through their own practices of theological reflection and contemplative prayer. Available curricular materials tend to script church school sessions in terms of specific meanings children should take from a story and particular behaviors they should exhibit as a result of the lesson. As a result, teachers unwittingly discourage creative and independent thinking, and children learn to provide the predictable and often overly

simplistic responses to each lesson intended by the curriculum writer.

The popular children's sermon joke, in which a pastor describes a furry animal with a long, bushy tail who likes nuts and a child replies, "Well, I know the answer is Jesus, but it sounds like a squirrel to me!" points to the dilemma younger elementary children face when they are capable of theological reflection and yet want to please the adults around them by providing the answer they've been taught to give. When we gift children with a different set of expectations through teaching sessions that incorporate wondering questions, dramatic improvisation, contemplative prayer practices, and experimental interpretative language, we create spaces in which children can try out different ways of integrating their experiences of the world and their encounters with God in Scripture, prayer, and daily life.

## Older Elementary Age Children

---

Once children reach age nine or ten, they channel much of their energy into scientific forms of inquiry. Their weekday school teachers are inviting them to investigate natural, linguistic, and aesthetic phenomena that children previously accepted as simply part of how the world works. Science experiments involve testing the effects of different variables on plant growth. Language arts classes incorporate sentence diagramming and deeper explorations of the grammatical structures of sentences and the linguistic roots of new and familiar vocabularies. Art lessons move beyond the basics of primary and secondary colors to encounters with the concepts of perspective, shading, and abstraction. Their

increasing cognitive ability to engage in complex reasoning processes merges with their similarly increasing awareness that their social world encompasses multiple and competing systems of meaning and interpretation. They have schoolmates with different religious beliefs, witness social and political debates about public policy, recognize that friends' households have different rules from their own, and watch television shows in which characters negotiate relationships using a variety of social and moral expectations.

Simple cause-effect reasoning about morality (e.g., if I misbehave in the store, dad will get mad and won't buy me an ice cream cone) gives way to more complicated ideas about what is right and just (e.g., the school bully is doing something wrong, but since his mom is always yelling at him, maybe he doesn't know how to treat other people nicely and so I should try to treat him well even though he treats me badly). They are becoming sensitive to hypocrisy and better equipped to assess whether adults and peers are living according to professed values and commitments. Thus, their task as biblical interpreters is more complex than that of younger children because they need to use their nascent abstract reasoning skills to cultivate a personal theological perspective that can compete with the myriad other options they now realize are available to them.

Religious leaders support this task when we ask older elementary children to dialogue with the Bible by considering three different types of questions in relation to faith stories. We ask *clarifying* questions, which focus the child's attention on the biblical text itself. Who are the characters in the story? What happens in the beginning, middle,

and end of the story? What details are actually in the text, and are there elements missing that we expected to find (because of how we've heard the story before or our assumptions about typical characters or plots) but did not? These questions help children listen to the story in its own words.

We also ask *experiential* questions, which invite children to relate the story to their contemporary experiences. How are the characters in this story like you or someone you know? If Jesus was going to talk with people who are social outcasts at your school, who would they be? Who makes the rules in our community, and what happens if those rules are broken? These questions help children identify the ongoing relevance and connection of the Bible to contemporary life. They also transpose biblical stories from their classical keys into contemporary melodies.

We pair these two modes of inquiry with a third approach: *responsive* questions, which ask children to consider how the story might transform their lives and inform their beliefs and actions. Who will you reach out to in your neighborhood this week? What need in your community will you pray for each day until we meet again? How would you explain what "healing" is to your friend in the hospital? These questions invite children to live out faith stories in their own lives, to become the embodiment of the Scriptures in their interactions with others.

Creating spaces where all three types of questions are part of lively discussion and debate helps older elementary children develop a thoughtful inquisitiveness about their spiritual experiences and their faith tradition. Yet we need not explore these questions only

through words and conversation. Children ages nine to twelve continue to enjoy and require experiential learning opportunities. They can identify basic characters and plot movement by sketching out individual scenes from a biblical story on newsprint and then putting the scenes in order, or by writing dramatic scripts based on careful research into the people and historical period of the story. They might translate the story into contemporary times through skits, comic strip creations, or links to popular music or culture. Their response explorations might involve participating in outreach activities, composing intercessory prayers, developing blessing rituals, or covenanting in worship to hold one another accountable to personal and communal commitments. By drawing on their many intelligences to hear the story from the three perspectives of historical clarity, contemporary experience, and faithful response, we increase their ability to make meaningful connections between their personal story and God's Word in the midst of other value systems competing for their appreciation and loyalty.

The ancient contemplative practice of *lectio divina*, or holy reading, is also a helpful spiritual discipline to introduce to this age group. Because older elementary children's primary learning systems are skewed toward scientific modes of reasoning, they need the balance of a more mystical approach to

learning to prevent them from equating religious belief solely with right doctrine. *Lectio divina* consists of four movements. First, someone reads aloud a short Scripture passage (or other spiritual reading) and the group listens silently to the text. Then, the text is read a second time, and the leader asks the children to listen for a word or phrase that "speaks" to them. These words and phrases can be named aloud after the second reading concludes. The text is read a third time and the children listen for what God might be saying to them or calling them to do through the passage. A short period of personal journaling or small group discussion might follow this reading. A fourth reading of the text concludes the reflection time, followed by individual or group prayers for each participant, that she or he might fulfill God's call as it has been expressed through the Scriptures. As a companion experience alongside critical study of the Bible, this contemplative encounter with Scripture helps remind children that God's wisdom comes through both study and prayer.

---

## Conclusion

Becoming Christian is a lifelong process. At every age and stage of childhood, girls and boys need adults in their lives who will encourage them to notice and

**What they need most from us are not definitive answers to faith questions, but spiritual tools they can use to build and interpret their own relationships with God.**

respond to God's presence and activity in the world. Children rely on parents and religious leaders to introduce them to the stories of their faith tradition and to guide them in exploring the connections between ancient tales of God's relationship with the world and the ordinary events of their contemporary lives. What they need most from us are not definitive answers to faith questions, but spiritual tools they can use to build and interpret their own relationships with God. Regular experiential encounters with biblical stories and communal teaching practices that encourage children's experimental and inquisitive integration of faith narratives and personal experiences provide such tools. They structure the foundational culture of infant and toddler lives, pique the curiosity and imagination of preschoolers, encourage personalized religious storytelling among younger elementary children, and challenge the investigative powers of nine through twelve year olds.

Because children's capabilities vary by age, we may be tempted to segregate them in narrowly graded classrooms "for their own spiritual good." But, as the opening description of a real children's church school class demonstrates, participating in a multi-age community can help children encounter God's Word through the intersection of many gifts and abilities. The preschool mind discovers new imaginative possibilities through the older elementary children's construction of the script for the Ruth drama. Younger elementary children shape the story for the rest through their costume and prop choices. Preschoolers interject different interpretations of gleaning, sadness, and joy through their personalized reenactments of various scenes. The questions adults pose at the video screening provide opportunities for younger children to give voice to their ideas and challenge older children to explain their thinking.

These multi-age encounters are examples of spiritual cross-

pollination, and their presence in children's lives helps to generate more varied spiritual fruit as the Church's youngest members are formed in faith.

#### Works Cited

- Brueggemann, Walter. *Belonging and Growing in the Christian Community* (Atlanta: General Assembly Mission Board, Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1979).
- Meredith, Dennis. "Patricia Bauer: Mysteries of 'Childhood Amnesia'" in *Duke University News & Communications* ([www.dukenews.duke.edu/2005/10/bauer.\\_print.ht](http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/2005/10/bauer._print.ht).)
- Wimberly, Anne Streaty. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).
- Yust, Karen Marie. *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).





# Saturated Spirituality: Creating Environments that Nurture All Children

David M. Csinos

**H**ave you ever been so moved by a piece of music that you shed a tear or can't help but clap along? Are you passionate about making a difference or, as Gandhi said, being "the change you wish to see in the world?" Are you the sort of person who likes to go on long hikes and just spend time among nature? Do you love to learn and do you continually soak up information about the world around you?

Whatever type of person you are, it cannot be denied that you are a spiritual being who is capable of engaging in transcendence, of moving beyond the here-and-now, and connecting with God. Just as the questions I posed imply different ways of viewing the world and expressing yourself, there are also many ways to be spiritual. Yet amidst this diversity, four ways of expressing one's spirituality—four *spiritual styles*—emerge as legitimate and formational avenues for knowing God.

In this article, we will take a journey through what my colleagues and I have come to call spiritual styles. Spiritual styles are four distinct ways in which people encounter God and express their ultimate concerns. After a brief introduction to the concept of spiritual styles, I will describe some of the significant characteristics of each style. Drawing from the results of a six-month qualitative research project, I will move toward a discussion about how pastors, teachers, and leaders of children can create environments and ministries that nurture the spirituality and faith of children from each spiritual style. Our first task, however, is to explore what exactly I mean when I speak of spiritual styles.

*Spiritual styles describe key ways in which human beings encounter God and express their inherent spirituality, faith, and ultimate concerns.* More broadly, they speak of four manners in which people make meaning of themselves, the world around them, and their relationships with other individuals. Each of the four spiritual styles illustrates key aspects of our faith and our quests to transcend the here-and-now, connect with God, and understand our surroundings. They have the power to affect our very core and they act as lenses through which we see and make meaning of the world around us. My colleagues and I label the four spiritual styles **word, emotion, symbol, and action.**

---

**David M. Csinos, Th.M.** is a doctoral student in pastoral theology at Emmanuel College in the University of Toronto. He has written articles in journals and magazines and he is the author of a forthcoming book about spiritual styles and children. He has also served in children's ministry in a number of churches in southern Ontario.

## Four Spiritual Styles

Each one of these styles speaks of general ways of experiencing God and expressing our spiritual lives through distinct yet fluid boundaries. Many people possess one dominant spiritual style, yet might be influenced by the other three in significant ways as well. And this is a good thing! A healthy spirituality should consist of a balanced tension between all four styles. When such a balance is not present in a person's faith life, there is a dangerous tendency to fall into an extreme form of one style.

Furthermore, a person's dominant spiritual style can change over time. Someone who expressed a word-centered approach today might become focused on emotions, symbols, or action later in life. While our dominant spiritual styles affect the way we see and interact with the world around us, our environment can in turn affect which of these four styles come to dominate the landscape of our inner lives.

I can certainly attest to the ways in which one's dominant spiritual style can change over time. As I look back on my life, I am able to highlight key times in which words characterized my spirituality and faith, times during which I focused on emotions, other moments that were based on symbols, and still other times that action was what seemed to matter most. And during many of these times, the faith communities and spiritual environments in which I found myself certainly had an impact on which spiritual styles I used to express myself, understand the world, and connect with God.

Joyce Bellous, a retired professor at McMaster Divinity College, Denise Peltomaki, a former children's pastor, and I worked together to design two self-assessment tools—one for adults and one for children—that measure the degree to which each spiritual style affects a person's life. Each assessment is made up of questions that assist people in identifying their dominant spiritual styles and understanding the styles that might not be so important to them. These assessments, available from Tall Pine Press ([www.tallpinepress.com](http://www.tallpinepress.com)), ask a number of questions about common and sometimes overlooked assumptions focusing on topics such as prayer, relationships, money, learning, and communication. Based on one's selection of multiple choice responses, the tools measure the presence of the four spiritual styles in one's life. Many people

who have used these tools to assess themselves have found them to be incredibly helpful in understanding how they make sense of the world, how they engage in relationships with other people, and how they understand ministry and faith formation.

What does all this talk of spiritual styles have to do with children's faith formation? Through qualitative research and children's self-assessment, I have found that children readily use spiritual styles in their everyday lives. They encounter God, see the world, and experience the spiritual environments of their faith communities through words, emotions, symbols, and action.

This is an important point for children's ministers, leaders, teachers, and parents to keep in mind. Without an understanding of these four ways of knowing God, we might presume that our dominant style is the "correct" or "best" approach to spirituality and then form our ministries so that children experience faith formation according to our dominant style. This can leave some young people feeling as though something is wrong with them or that they are not welcome or included in their congregations. While pastors, teachers, and leaders certainly do not intend for these results, the feeling that they do not fit in their congregations can cut children off from having genuine encounters with God and engaging in life-changing faith formation.

It becomes imperative that those working with children—and parents who seek to nurture their children's faith—gain an understanding of the four spiritual styles, come to see what styles might dominate their spiritual lives, and nurture the faith formation of children in environments characterized by a balanced tension between all four styles. When these things happen, children will not only feel a sense of fit; they will also come to see that there are indeed many legitimate and formative ways in which people experience God and express their faith.

### A Word-Centered Approach

A word-centered approach to spirituality upholds the importance of words in making sense of the world and experiencing God. People of this style focus on having the correct words in correct relationship with one another, as well as having words in the correct relationship with those things to which they refer.

People with a word-centered spirituality see faith formation and growth occurring through

increases in knowledge, understanding, and reflection on spiritual issues, often through the study of sacred texts. People of this style *know* God when they *know about* God. Thus, the accuracy of words matters because it demonstrates a well-grounded faith and conveys important propositional knowledge that can help others be formed in faith.

Spoken *and* written words are vital to people who express their inner lives through this style. The spoken word enables people to instruct, preach, and proclaim important information and interpretations that enable faith formation to occur. Written words act as sources of knowledge to be absorbed and interpreted. Scripture becomes highly valued as the Word above all words. God's instructions to Ezekiel (3:1) can be a mantra for this style. It calls people to "eat this book," to ingest scripture in order to grow in wisdom and knowledge and thus grow in faith. Additionally, people of this style tend to think of God in concrete ways, as revealed and able to be known.

A word-centered approach to spirituality tends to produce people who are engaged in scholarship and theological interpretation in order to delve into the content of faith and aid others in understanding theology and doctrine. Many great theologians throughout history—from Thomas Aquinas to Karl Barth—can be understood through this style. These individuals, like many word-centered people today, value the power of rational arguments to persuade others into adopting accurate interpretations of the faith. Conceptual clarity comes to be seen as the goal of spiritual development and faith formation.

An example of a contemporary tradition that appears to be focused on this style is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a denomination that highly values having knowledge of proper doctrine and correctly interpreting scripture and theological texts. As candidates for ordination within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) go through the process leading toward ordination, they must take a number of rigorous examinations that test their knowledge in areas like Bible, theology, and polity. In the denomination's own words, "The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) considers basic knowledge of the content of the Bible to be an essential prerequisite for ministry. The Bible Content examination is intended to assess one's knowledge of stories, themes and pertinent passages in the Old and New Testaments." Clearly, this tradition values words and the knowledge that they can impart into the spiritual lives of human beings.

## An Emotion-Centered Approach

A spirituality that is centered on emotions places one's feeling at the core of the spiritual life. The life of faith is nurtured through having and expressing deep feelings and emotions, which are seen as potent ways of connecting with God. While word-centered people might treat their emotions with suspicion, people of this style see their feelings as inherently good. Focusing on emotions is not a lazy substitute for rigorous academic work; it involves the hard work of getting in touch with one's inner self.

The arts are vital to the spirituality and faith of people with an emotion-centered approach to spirituality. Music, dance, and drama are especially important for their power to evoke the human emotions and connect one's affective nature with the transcendent. People of this style often place a priority on musical worship and encourage people to be free to express their emotions while making or listening to music.

While embodied expression and feelings are highly valued, oral witness or testimony is seen as an important way of expressing emotions as well as tapping into and capturing the feelings of others. Giving testimony to the power of God in one's own life can easily become an emotional experience, involving laughter and tears, deep sorrow and immense joy. Conversion experiences are often hallmarks of giving testimony and involve sensing that God is connecting with a person in order to change them from the inside-out. Oral witness is also understood as a way of persuading others through flashes of insight received from God rather than rational, intellectual arguments.

Relationships matter for their power to give people feelings of joy, fulfillment, and security. While the rationalism and intellectualism of word-centered spirituality might be suspect by people of this style, both styles share a focus on concrete expressions of God. For those with an emotion-centered approach to spirituality, God is here-and-now and can be reached and felt through emotionally-charged experiences. Jesus Christ is often conceived in relational terms, perhaps as the lover of one's soul or a nurturing and kind parent. The transformational goal of emotion-centered spirituality is the personal renewal of one's innermost self.

Pentecostal and charismatic traditions are vivid examples of this spiritual style. They demonstrate a

clear focus on emotions through their intense musical worship and personal testimony, as well as the freedom they give to divine expression through acts such as speaking in tongues and raising one's arms to God. Some of the core values of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada are "Pentecostal worship, every-member ministry, loving relationships, Holy Spirit-empowered evangelism, anointed proclamation and practical expression of Christian faith."<sup>2</sup> Terms such as "Holy Spirit-empowered," "anointed," and "practical expression" speak of this denomination's high esteem of connecting to God through the emotions.

## A Symbol-Centered Approach

While both previous spiritual styles value concrete images of God, a symbol-centered spirituality moves from the concrete to the abstract through a focus on symbols, metaphors, and images. This is a mystical approach to spirituality and faith that views God as infinite mystery. As such, God is more sensed than spoken. People of this style hold that God transcends words as well as finite human understanding. In the words of popular author Rob Bell, "The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It is about things and beings that ultimately can't be put into words. Language fails. And if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not" (Bell, 32).

While God can not be completely understood, God can be sensed through symbols and rituals that capture and reflect God's transcendent nature. This way of sensing the presence of God is distinct from feeling God through an emotion-centered approach. It is a deep awareness of God that cannot be explained. After all, if it can be explained through words, these people might hold that it was not a true God-experience.

Artwork and the imagination are central to this approach to spirituality and faith. After all, we who are made in God's image have been given imaginations that can be used to connect with God and nourish our inner lives. Beauty, whether natural or made by human hands, is prized by people of this style for its ability to express God's infinite creativity and being. The great symbols and artwork that have been created throughout the history of the Christian church have the transcendent ability to tap into our inner selves and allow us to sense the presence of God. Many symbol-centered people might sense God simply by walking into a beautiful space, such

as St. Joseph's Oratory in Montréal, the Spanish Synagogue in Prague, or Hagia Sophia, the 1500-year-old basilica and mosque that was converted into a breath-taking museum in Istanbul. For others, the serene calmness of a river or meadow is enough to evoke a spirit-to-Spirit connection.

Since talk about God, faith, and the spiritual life is limited, symbol-centered people value silence, stillness, and solitude as a means of knowing God and experiencing transcendence beyond the here-and-now. Through silence, God can be heard and sensed deep within one's inner self, even though such experiences are unable to be expressed to others in words. Through stillness, people can wait for God's presence to surround them. Through solitude, they can retreat from the world in order to refresh their inner lives.

People who have a symbol-centered approach to spirituality value spiritual practices, such as listening or centering prayer, *lectio divina*, silent retreats, and meditating on icons. Practices such as these can help them attain the goal of faith formation: union with the transcendent, ineffable God.

There are many historic examples of traditions and individuals who portray a symbol-centered approach to spirituality, including the great English mystic and anchoress, Julian of Norwich, and the desert fathers who lived as monks, hermits, and ascetics. Contemporary examples include the Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches, and some emerging churches. These groups draw from traditional ways in which the church has mystically connected with God. Rites and rituals such as the Eucharist, the creation of beautiful spaces that speak of God's divine presence, and liturgies that are rich in symbolism are used in order to unite with a God that transcends ordinary time and space.

## An Action-Centered Approach

The final spiritual style is centered on action. It is an approach to faith that focuses on what is being done in the world. Rather than what one thinks, feels, or senses, people of this style focus on what one does to evoke positive changes in the world. These people are activists who roll up their sleeves and get to work. The Lord's Prayer, which includes a request that "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," might be an appropriate motto or mantra for this style.

Prayer, for these people, is more lived than spoken. These people encounter God and nurture



their spiritual lives when they are actively working to transform the world. This is an approach to spirituality that follows the tradition of the prophets, who spoke and acted in order to bring about God's will and justice on earth and to provoke others to change their oppressive ways.

Yet, like many of the biblical prophets, action-centered people can be misunderstood and seen as single-minded or impatient. Their zealous passion can evoke negative responses from others, especially because they often act without taking time to explain the reasons for their actions. After all, for these people, words matter far less than action. Thus, they can often become isolated by faith communities, who might see them as eccentric, troublesome, and demeaning. On the other hand, action-centered individuals sometimes believe that those who are unwilling to help them are too blind to see what must be done or too cowardly to fight the system and change the world.

Nevertheless, motivated by a deep union with the needs of the world, these people often press on in their unswerving missions in order to bring about peace, justice, and wholeness even if they must do so alone. Clearly, the transformational goal for action-centered people is bringing about change and working to upset the destructive and harmful conditions in the world that God so loves.

Contemporary examples include Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Desmond Tutu, as well as some leaders within the emerging and missional church movements, including Brian McLaren and Shane Claiborne. Ron Sider, Founder and President of Evangelicals for Social Action, knows that value of getting things done in the world. In his bestselling book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, he writes, "regardless of what we do or say at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, rich Christians who neglect the poor are not the people of God" (Sider, 60). He is affirming that what matters more than informative sermons and emotional worship is how we live and act in the world around us.

## Taking Spiritual Styles to the Extreme

While each of these four spiritual styles are formative and have the power to authentically connect people with God, each style can be taken to

the extreme. When they are not balanced by each other, rich and genuine ways of expressing one's inner life can become harmful aberrations of spirituality and faith.

For example, a word-centered approach, when taken to the extreme, simply becomes a faith characterized by cold, hard ideas and cannot sustain people during times of suffering and crisis. An action-centered spirituality that is not balanced by words, emotions, and symbols can become work devoid of empathy, love, and joy, and it can alienate people for "talking the talk" and failing to grasp visions while not taking the time to explain one's transformational goals.

A healthy spirituality is one that possesses a degree of balance between these four spiritual styles. Surely, most people will find themselves leaning in one or two specific directions and relying on a particular way of knowing God and making meaning of the world. Few people will possess a fairly equal balance of all four styles. But this does not mean that we can ignore the ways in which other people make sense, express their ultimate concerns, and connect with God. And let us remember that these styles are not hard-and-fast in the organic and evolving lives of human beings. People's styles can adapt and change over time.

It is important to continually engage in some soul searching to ensure that one is not drifting too far from a balanced tension between all four styles and developing a single-style approach to spirituality. When it comes to children's ministry, pastors, leaders, and teachers can create environments that help to nurture the faith and spirituality of all young people by including elements that speak to children that possess each spiritual style. In such an environment, children can encounter God through words, emotions, symbols, and action and no child will be left behind.

## Creating Inclusive Environments

Ideally, congregations are places where people are welcomed, supported, encouraged, and challenged. They are places in which people ought to feel included in the life and practices of the community, where they sense a satisfactory degree of fit. So it is with children's ministries. All children ought to be welcomed, affirmed, and appropriately challenged

toward growth as they experience and engage in children's ministries and in the wider life of the congregation. Without this feeling of fit, their spiritual growth and formation in faith can be at risk.

Sadly, I have visited my share of churches, programs, and ministries that do not welcome all people into their midst and don't include all in their life of faith. During research that I conducted a few years ago, I had a number of conversations with children who attended children's ministry programs at different congregations. While some of the children had nothing but great things to say about children's church, Sunday school, and mid-week programs, others did not sense that they fit or were welcomed for who they were.

One nine-year-old boy who I shall refer to as Caleb clearly had a symbol-centered approach to spirituality. He loved mysteries like the Bermuda Triangle and Stonehenge and he felt close to God in the great outdoors. Caleb knows that the Bible is full of mysteries about God, but he feels as though the leaders of the children's ministry programs at his congregation attempt to explain away all the wonders and mysteries surrounding who God is. In his words, "they're explaining the wrong things." "I feel like they're saying that there are no mysteries of him...when I know there are." This boy did not feel as though these ministries welcomed him for who he was. Aware that his congregation was not meeting his spiritual needs, young Caleb began reading the Bible in solitude, not to gain answers to questions about God, but to revel in the sense of wonder and mystery that the Bible allowed him to feel.

Not all children might be as insightful or resourceful as Caleb. Some children in situations similar to Caleb's might come to see that the reason they don't feel included in their faith communities and their programs is because there is something wrong with them. This can lead to unwarranted crises in faith and spirituality and can close children off from faith formation and having formative encounters with the living God. None of us want to see this happen. But everyday, unaware of different ways of knowing God, leaders, pastors, and teachers develop programs that cater to their own spiritual styles and unintentionally leave children who know God differently to struggle as they try to make sense of why they do not have the same experiences as the children and leaders around them.

In order to help all children open themselves to connecting with God and being formed in faith, congregations must take into account the different spiritual styles through which young people can come to know and experience God. Aware of spiritual styles, those who develop and lead programs with children can intentionally create environments in which young people of all spiritual styles are included and experience a satisfying degree of fit. Joyce Bellous writes,

Inclusive teachers [and churches] provide for the study of words, so that children become precise and make cognitive gains; offer opportunities to learn through feeling and open up occasions for telling personal stories and explaining what they mean, using the arts; allow time for silence, wonderment and imagination to set the agenda for interpreting experience; and bring children into settings where they can take specific, focused action aimed at improving the world. (Bellous, 102)

Although churches surely attempt to create environments conducive to spiritual formation and that help people to connect with God, many miss the mark and fail to include children of all spiritual styles. Those who do not feel a sense of fit are at risk of keeping their spiritual experiences and sensibilities private, robbing others of the richness of spiritual diversity (Bellous, 102). Including elements that speak to children of each style is vital for environments in which every child is welcomed, included, and nurtured.

There are countless models, methods, and practices for ministries that nurture faith formation in children and that can be quite effective for nurturing the spiritual lives of young people. Although ministry models and techniques which prove to be effective with one congregation might be inappropriate or unproductive at another, I believe that these suggestions, when employed, work to create environments of intentional inclusivity. The ideas I present are grounded in the real life of children who spoke with me over a six-month period. Through our conversations, I was able to get a sense of how children from each spiritual style have their spiritual lives nurtured, engage in faith formation, and come to know God.

# Practices

## More than Just Talking Heads: Practices for Nurturing Word- Centered Children

---

One of the central concerns of a word-centered approach of spirituality is the illumination of the mind. With this in mind, it makes sense that welcoming and nurturing children with a spirituality dominated by words involves assisting them in their intellectual quest to understand God and the world around them. The following six practices all have this goal in mind:

### 1. Focus on the Bible, but don't be limited to the Bible.

Children with a word-centered approach to spirituality hold the Bible in higher esteem than children with other spiritual styles. The Bible is regarded as the inspired Word of God, the very words that God uses to speak to humanity. Ministries, programs, and lessons need to help children build their biblical knowledge through memorization, study, interpretation and exegesis. Limiting instruction solely to the Bible can rob children of gaining insight into many other important fields of knowledge. Include lessons that teach children about church history, theology, liturgy, and social issues. Word-centered children soak up information so that they can better make sense of and interpret the world around them. Let's give them all the knowledge we can.

### 2. Let the Bible read children.

Learning about the Bible cannot be the sole goal of ministry with word-centered children. After all, as we read the Bible, it has the power to read us, to form us as faith-full disciples of Christ. By using the Bible as a mirror for their own lives, children can better understand themselves and they can come to see the ways in which God has interacted with humanity in the past and how God continues to speak to us today. The words in the Bible are not just there for us to memorize and exegete. The Scriptures have the power to inform, form, and transform our lives and the lives of the children with whom we interact. We must allow them to “get

under our skin” so that we can be formed and transformed by them. As we exegete the Bible, the Bible helps us to exegete ourselves.

### 3. Be aware of human development.

Children learn in many different ways as they grow from newborn infants into teenagers. Having a basic, working knowledge of key theories of human development can help pastors, teachers, and leaders to shape lessons in ways that best suit the learning and developmental capabilities of young people across the life-span. While young children struggle to understand abstract concepts and ideas, older children are able to go well beyond the memorization of simple facts and begin to interpret texts and ideas for themselves. The cognitive capacities of children ought to affect the ways in which we teach them. When we know more about how children grow, develop, and learn, we can better assist word-centered children in knowing about God and in turn knowing God. (An excellent introductory resource for aspects of human development is *Human Development and Faith* edited by Felicity Kelcourse.)

### 4. Avoid “dumbing-down” lessons.

God created all of us to have brains and bodies that develop gradually over time and affect the way we learn as we grow and change. We need not “dumb-down” our lessons and ministries for children. When we do not give them the respect they deserve simply because they learn differently than adults, we implicitly tell children that they are not valued. Children with a word-centered approach to spirituality thrive as they make gains in their cognitive knowledge of God and they can become frustrated by “dumbed-down” lessons with word-searches and other menial activities.

### 5. Become co-learners and welcome questions.

As teachers, pastors, and leaders, we can learn right alongside the children in our midst. None of us has all the answers. If we open ourselves to receiving new insights, even the most familiar of Bible stories and passages can teach us something new about God, faith, and life. As we instruct children and help them learn more about God, let us remember that we are all finite beings with limited knowledge about an infinite God. We can become co-learners

on the journey to know more of God and we can welcome children's questions. We can be honest when we are unsure of answers to their questions and we can seek out answers with the children in our midst.

## 6. Keep a well-stocked church library.

Churches can provide inclusive environments and ministries for word-centered children by making sure that they have access to a wide range of resources in their church libraries. Many of these children most vividly hear God's voice through reading. During my conversations with children, I heard several young people tell me that they feel incredibly close to God in church libraries, surrounded by a great cloud of written witnesses. In fact, for several of these children, the library was where they felt closest to God.

By having access to a resource-filled church library, children can not only satisfy their spiritual needs through reading about God, the church, and other spiritual and religious subjects; they can sense the very presence of God. Let's not forget to make time to read with the children to whom we minister. Why not set up a reading corner in your Sunday school or have a weekly story time in your congregation's library? When we read together with children we can joyfully learn with one another.

## More than Just Feeling Good: Practices for Nurturing Emotion- Centered Children

---

In *Children in the Worshipping Community*, David Ng and Virginia Thomas state that "Music and children are a natural combination" (Ng and Thomas, 102). Their words are particularly true for children with a spiritual style that is dominated by feelings. Therefore, inclusive churches make room for these children by intentionally including music and the arts in their curriculum, ministries, and activities. There are at least five key ways in which leaders and pastors can welcome and nurture emotion-centered children.

### 1. Don't be limited by fads.

The Christian church has been singing songs to God for two thousand years. We have a rich and vast tradition that includes a wide variety of chants,

hymns, and choruses that can be used to help children connect with God—from Gregorian chants to contemporary rock music, African American spirituals to the meditative songs of the Taizé movement. By drawing from a wide variety of musical traditions, we can help children appreciate how Christians of other times and places used the universal language of music to worship and experience the living God.

Don Ratcliff, a Christian education professor at Wheaton College, has noted that Christians "make associations between their music and their emotions through classical conditioning... Later, although the religious experience may have been forgotten, the association between the feelings and certain music selections may remain." The music that children listen to in their congregations can have a considerable impact them in the years to come, so it is best to expose them to a variety of different styles of music within an inclusive and accepting environment.

### 2. Don't forget the lyrics.

When selecting music for children, it is important to take the lyrical content of songs into consideration. Music can certainly evoke strong emotions, but it also conveys theological ideas through lyrics. Choose songs with lyrics that can be understood by children but also espouse deep theology that is appropriate for your context and tradition. Finding songs with lyrics that are simple *and* theologically rich can be difficult work, but it will help children to have emotional experiences that are enveloped within a theology that is upheld by their tradition and community. Perhaps you can introduce songs by explaining who wrote them, what they are about, and what words like "Hallelujah" mean.

### 3. Think about consumption and creation.

In today's mass-marketed world, children are often seen as consumers. They are the direct targets of advertisers, who seek to help them develop brand loyalty and learn to become good consumers. It can be easy to overlook the fact that young people are inherently creators as well. They are imaginative, artistic, and creative. We can help children write new lyrics to a familiar tune or provide simple instruments that even young children can use to make music to God. Whether they are a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Mozart or completely tone-deaf, all children are capable of making beautiful music to God.

## 4. Go beyond music.

While music may be a more common way to evoke emotional connections to God, it is certainly not the only way. Emotion-centered children can also be nurtured through other art forms, including drama and dance. Organize a drama or dance program at your congregation and allow the children involved in it to perform for their friends and family members or, even better, the entire congregation? One young boy that I spoke with said he felt closest to God when he was in front of his faith community performing in his church's Christmas pageant. Dance and drama can assist children in expressing their inner lives in creative ways and these art forms have the power to help children feel the presence of their divine Creator.

## 5. Make room in corporate worship.

Gretchen Wolff Pritchard wrote that “adults come to church on Sunday in order to worship; children come to Sunday school to acquire information” (Pritchard, 140-141). One of the most formative elements of the life of a congregation is communal worship. It is through worshipping as a congregation that the many different people come together as one to praise God. But children are not always present to participate in congregational worship.

If we include children in this formative practice that is central to the life of congregations, we can help them see that they are a part of something greater than themselves. We can show them that they are part of a great cloud of witnesses, that transcends space and time, who use their whole selves—including their emotions—to connect with God. By including children in our times of worship and praise, we help them become formed into members of our faith communities who seek out ways of authentically experiencing God.

## More than Just Silence: Practices for Nurturing Symbol- Centered Children

---

It is not uncommon for people with a symbol-centered approach to spirituality to feel uncomfortable or unwelcomed in congregational programs and ministries. Since God is seen as ineffable mystery, churches and lessons that focus on learning about God can be seen as robbing God

of the very attributes that make God what and who God is. It is possible to create environments that nurture symbol-centered children. There are a number of practices that congregations can utilize in forming an environment to nurture children with this spiritual style.

### 1. Prayer matters.

A spiritual environment for children with a symbol-centered approach to spirituality can be formed through times and spaces that are intentionally dedicated to prayer. For these children, personal prayer is a key means for having intimate and personal connections with the transcendent God.

Leaders, pastors, and teachers can include several different types of prayer in their ministries, including quiet, inner prayer, “breath” prayers, or call-and-response prayers. Children can even be given opportunities to lead one another in different styles of prayer that they might prefer. One practice that I have found particularly helpful is to create a semi-private “prayer corner” by partitioning off a corner of a room with room dividers. Children can go to prayer corners to retreat from noise and crowds and to spend some time alone in quiet prayer with God.

### 2. Keep things open.

I have found that symbol-centered children are particularly affected by the spaces in which they meet for children's programs and ministries. It is not uncommon for them to be negatively affected by these spaces. They tend to prefer wide, open spaces. One young girl that I spoke with told me that her church's Sunday school rooms make her “feel all shoved up—like I'm being crammed inside of a locker.”

Whenever possible, provide children with large, open spaces. Should your church building not allow for enough space, try simple decorating tips like painting the walls a lighter color, using smaller furniture, and ensuring that the room is not cluttered. If the weather cooperates, why not hold programs and ministries outside, where children can be free from the obstruction of four walls?

### 3. Get back to nature.

Children with this spiritual style experience God among the natural world. They sense God's presence as they listen to water trickle down a river, smell the

aroma of wildflowers, or watch the snow fall on a winter's morning. If leaders and pastors wish to help children sense God's presence, they do well to go outside with them.

There are many practices that can help children to encounter God among God's creation: take children on nature walks, help them plant gardens and nurture vegetable plants, sit with them and quietly feel and listen to the wind, and have them share what they love about nature. All of these practices can combat what Richard Louv calls "nature-deficit disorder," a lack of exposure to the natural world. Spending time among nature reminds us not only of the beauty of God's creation, but also the fragility of nature. These practices can foster a sense of creation care among children.

#### **4. Pay attention to pace and volume.**

Thomas à Kempis once wrote, "In the silence and quietness of heart a devout soul profiteth much...that she may be so much the more familiar with God" (Kempis, 41). Nurturing children with a symbol-centered spirituality involves creating sacred spaces and times. This can be accomplished through a slow pace, a quiet environment, and an opportunity for stillness.

While some people might argue that quiet and stillness are tell-tale signs of boredom, symbol-centered children demonstrate the richness of a silence that allows them hear God's voice and a slowness that calms them enough to sense God's presence. Rather than leading to boredom, a quiet, calm pace of ministries can evoke a sense of reverence and wonder among young people. Why not try some breathing exercises to assist the children in becoming calm and getting in touch not only with God, but with their inner selves. Of course, the entire time of a ministry or program need not be slow and quiet. But it is important to, at times, create a calm, quiet, and tranquil space.

#### **5. Nurture a sense of mystery, reverence, and awe.**

Ministries that meet the spiritual needs of mystics approach God with mystery, wonder, reverence, and awe. God is seen as an infinite, transcendent, ineffable being that is worthy of our wonder and reverence. These children hold that God cannot be completely understood and they are content to marvel at the mystery that is God.

Instead of simply teaching children *about* God, pastors, teachers, and leaders can nurture these children by wondering together with them about the God who transcends words. Jerome Berryman has found that when adults express wonder, reverence, and awe toward God, it allows children time and space to do likewise (Berryman, 62). It allows the self to have spirit-to-Spirit connections to the God of wonders. An excellent resource for wondering alongside children is *Godly Play*. Created by Berryman, *Godly Play* is an "imaginative approach to religious education" that evokes a sense of wonder not only in children, but in people of all ages.

#### **6. Saturate spaces with symbols and rituals.**

Creating spaces that stir up a sense of mystery, reverence, wonder, and awe can include adding symbols and rituals to ministries and programs. Some traditions and congregations are already bursting with rituals and symbols. But we need to ensure that children have access to their richness. If your congregation is fairly free of rituals and symbols, you can try adding simple ones to your ministries and spaces. Rituals like foot washing, the passing of the peace, and candle lighting as well as symbols such as the cross, religious artwork, seasonal banners, and stained-glass windows can help children connect with God, feel included in the faith community, and form their identities as members of their communities of practice. Why not have children create rituals and symbols for their ministries and programs? They can think together about how to symbolize different aspects of faith and life through simple rituals and they can create their own symbols, like making stained-glass windows out of cellophane and tissue paper.

We can also help symbol-centered children connect with God by taking Brian McLaren's advice and begin "faithing our practices" (McLaren, 184). When we faith our practices, we connect simple elements of our everyday lives with God's cosmic presence and story. Passing out a snack can be a symbol for welcoming the stranger. Washing our hands can represent how God washes us clean. The possibilities are endless.

## More than Just Getting Things Done: Practices for Nurturing Action- Centered Children

---

In browsing through the prepackaged, marketed curricula available from Christian bookstores and publishers, few (if any) seem to be geared toward satisfying the spiritual needs of children with an action-centered approach to spirituality. The “application-oriented” teachings of many mass-marketed curricula and programs too often focus on individual choices and personal morals and fail to nurture the world-changing drive of these children. These young people need to go beyond reminders to share their toys. They need to meet children who have no toys, go on “toy fasts,” organize toy drives, and fight for justice in the lives of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized.

Even through pre-packaged curricula that intentionally nurture action-centered children might be difficult to come by, there are a number of practices that, when utilized, can help action-centered children to be nurtured and feel included in their faith communities.

### 1. Provide opportunities to see the tears in their eyes.

Children with an action-centered approach to spirituality need to be in the world, being agents of change and helping bring about the fullness of God’s reign. Communities who wish to nurture and include these children do well to provide them with opportunities not only to serve those who are in need, but also to meet and get to know them, to see the tears in their eyes (Frost, 263).

Although this can be risky, helping children to have first-hand encounters with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized is incredibly meaningful to those who have an action-centered approach to spirituality. Through these encounters, children can become one with the “other” in solidarity against poverty, racism, oppression, and exploitation. These experiences of coming to know people they are trying to help can keep action-centered children grounded in reality and they can assist them in getting to know what needs to be done to truly help those in need.

### 2. Do it gradually.

Children need *gradual* opportunities to meet and serve those in need. In an article I wrote with Brian McLaren, Dan Jennings, and Karen-Marie Yust, we offer the following suggestion for gradually helping children to get to know those living in poverty or oppression:

A suburban preschool child might begin with her family sponsoring a child in Africa. In her elementary years, she might experience a summer exchange program with Native American children, leading to an inner-city immersion in middle school, followed by spending a summer among the urban poor in high school. Or a family might affiliate with a single helping organization, such as Habitat for Humanity, and involve their children first in limited contact activities (fundraising, food contributions), then at a moderate level (landscaping and words of support), and finally in full engagement (building alongside family members). (Csinos, et al., 19)

When teaching children about injustice by assisting them to meet those suffering from injustice, be careful not to do too much too soon. Start small, but don’t stay small. Keep in mind that we often grow when we are slightly out of our comfort zones. The spiritual formation of action-centered children involves providing them with opportunities to gradually get to know people who are poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

### 3. Don’t be overprotective.

Of course, we need to ensure that our children remain safe as they work towards a just and peaceful world. We don’t want to intentionally put our children in harm’s way. Pastors and teachers are, after all, charged with the task of helping to raise children in safe, loving, and nurturing environments. But safety need not compromise opportunities to make a difference. In fact, nurturing action-centered children might involve providing them with opportunities, when they are ready and willing, to step outside of their comfort zones.

Instead of completely sheltering young people from injustices in the world, we can teach children about God’s desire for them to bring about changes for the betterment of the global community. Often,

children are seen as too young to learn about the evils and struggles of the world. Ironically, however, too many children across the globe are not sheltered enough—they live as slaves, soldiers, and prostitutes.

Perhaps a first step is to educate our children about the injustices in the world and how to protect ourselves (and others) as we seek to eliminate these injustices. Be careful not to do too much too soon. We don't want to traumatize our children. While it is vital for us to protect our children, let's not make the all-to-common mistake of *overprotecting* them.

#### 4. Do it in community.

None of us can do the difficult work of fighting for peace and justice by ourselves. Thus, one key way to help action-centered children get down to work and make a difference is to provide opportunities for them to be involved in service projects alongside a diverse group of adults.

For one young girl that I have come to know, working alongside her congregation as a legitimate and valuable member was a significant way in which she came to know God and feel included in her community. And when children serve the poor and advocate for the oppressed with caring adults and peers, they can feel safe as they step outside their comfort zones and experience growth. After all, they wouldn't be doing it alone.

#### 5. Offer space for reflection.

Action-centered children can often get caught up in getting things done, in working to bring about positive changes in the world around them. They can forget about themselves and neglect the important work of self-care. In time, this can lead to burnout, personal crises, and severe doubt about one's life mission and vocation.

Leaders, pastors, and parents need to remind action-centered children of the importance of personal reflection and respite. There are several ways to help children express and reflect on their quests to change the world. They can write stories or poems, draw pictures, act out their experiences, and sing songs that express their desire for justice. Reflection can be personal or can occur in groups as children speak with one another about their desires to make a difference and how they are working to fight injustice. Having times of rest and reflection, when children can focus on what is going on within themselves as they help those around them, is a vital

aspect of faith formation. But it can be easily overlooked action-centered people who are focused on getting things done.

## Concluding Thoughts

Creating inclusive environments in which all children can be nurtured based on their spiritual styles is not as complicated as one might think. Sometimes, the simplest approaches are also the most effective. Why deplete budgets on resources and curricula to create fast-paced, action-packed programs for children, when reading a good book, going on nature walks, singing simple yet meaningful hymns, or using one's imagination to wonder about God might be more effective at forming children in the faith?

Keep in mind the key goals in creating environments saturated with elements of each spiritual style: faith formation, spiritual nourishment, and encounters with our living God. The goal is not just to have children become knowledgeable, emotional, awe-struck, and focused on getting things done. When we forget about the ultimate objectives of children's ministry, we can become caught up in excessive intellectualism, emotionalism, mysticism, and encratism. But when we remember that knowing God and being formed in faith are the purposes of ministry, we can better make use of the many practices that nurture children of each style.

Some of the best ministries and most effective spiritual environments include contrasting characteristics of each spiritual style. Words alone are not able to meaningfully connect all children to God. But when words are balanced with actions, emotions, and symbols, every child involved can be welcomed and invited to encounter God according to their spiritual styles. And, in an important way, young people can also be challenged and stretched to move beyond their dominant styles and discover other ways in which children connect with God. While I fail to see how any one of the practices that I offered can be inclusive of young people of all spiritual styles, when practices for each style are juxtaposed, every child can feel a sense of inclusivity and fit within a balanced and welcoming spiritual environment.

It is crucial for leaders, pastors, and teachers to include practices for children of each spiritual style so that children can avoid becoming so embedded in



their dominant styles that they fall into one of the aberrations or extreme forms of spiritual styles. However, if a balanced tension between elements of all four styles exists, children are more likely to develop a balanced spirituality. They are also more apt to understand that there are many ways that people express what matters to them and connect with God in real and formative ways. Such a balanced sensitivity to the many ways of expressing spirituality and faith is a mark of churches that provide all children with a healthy sense of inclusivity and fit.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Bible Context Exam," <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/prep4min/bible-content-exam>.
- <sup>2</sup> Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, "What We Believe," [www.paoc.org/about/what-we-believe](http://www.paoc.org/about/what-we-believe).

### Works Cited

- Bell, Rob. *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
- Berryman, Jerome W. *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001.
- Csinos David M., et al., "Where are the Children? Keeping Sight of Young Disciples in the Emerging Church Movement." *Family and*

*Community Ministries: Empowering through Faith* 23:4 (2010).

- Frost, Michael. *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006.
- Kelcourse, Felicity, editor. *Human Development and Faith*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004.
- Louv, Richard. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2005.
- McLaren, Brian D. *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008.
- Ng, David and Virginia Thomas. *Children in the Worshipping Community*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1981.
- Pritchard, Gretchen Wolff. *Offering the Gospel to Children*. Cambridge: Cowley, 1992.
- Ratcliff, Donald E. "Music, God, and Psychology." *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, 35, no. 2 (1983), [www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1983/JASA6-83Ratcliff.html](http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1983/JASA6-83Ratcliff.html).
- Sider, Ronald J. *Rich Christians in a Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. New York: W. Publishing Group, 2005.
- Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Translated by Richard Whitford. New York: Pocket, 1956.



# Nurturing the Spiritual Formation of Children

Karen Marie Yust, Brian D. McLaren, Daniel L. Jennings, and David M. Csinos

*This article, originally written for emerging Christian communities, provides foundational practices and approaches for nurturing the spirituality of children in all Christian congregations.*

**W**hat we wish to present in this essay are practices and approaches to ministry that we believe to be foundational in nurturing the spirituality of children in emerging churches, and passing on the way of Jesus to future generations.

## Idea 1. Create an Environment of Inclusivity

There is a tendency in churches to speak of children's importance in the faith community yet also relegate them to separate programs in church basements. While congregations may think they are helping children by providing "age-appropriate" teaching, they are actually doing children a disservice by limiting their contact with the central practices, symbols, and rituals that define the faith community. When churches segregate children, they betray by their behavior a greater confidence in the liturgies of the modern classroom than in the formative practices of the worshipping community.

---

**Karen Marie Yust** is Associate Professor of Christian education at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA and author of *Real Kids, Real Faith* (Jossey-Bass, 2004). **Brian McLaren** is an internationally recognized speaker and the author of a dozen books including *A New Kind of Christianity* (Harper One, 2010). **Daniel Jennings** is an MTh candidate at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. **David Csinos** is the author of *Children's Ministry That Fits: Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approaches to Nurturing Children's Spirituality* (Wipf and Stock, 2011)

This article first appeared in *The Journal of Family and Community Ministries*, Baylor University School of Social Work, Volume 23 #4, Winter/Spring 2010. Used with permission.

Christian teaching and learning requires much more than the giving and receiving of the facts, figures, and doctrines often stressed by a “schooling-instructional” paradigm of Christian education. Learning to be a follower of Christ involves a complex process of religious socialization in which children and newcomers to a community form their Christian identity through interactions with several strata of the community. Historic and contemporary religious educators such as Horace Bushnell, George Albert Coe, John Westerhoff, and Thomas Groome have all stressed the importance of learning through socialization in the church community. Groome (1980) writes, “if self-identity is shaped by interaction with a collectivity, then to become Christian selves requires that we have socializing interaction with a Christian faith community which is capable of forming us in such faith” (115). Therefore, in order for such a process of Christian socialization and identity-formation to occur, children need access to the full strata of practices, rituals, symbols, and relationships—whether formal or informal—that define a Christian community within the context of the complete community.

Almost 150 years ago, Bushnell stated that the true notion of Christian education is “That the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself [or herself] as being otherwise” (4). This ideal of identity formation through full immersion experiences in a community of Christian discipleship can be embraced by many emerging communities. Even those of a more baptistic persuasion, who emphasize the importance of a conversion moment in life, may appreciate how children’s exposure to many aspects of congregational life increases their desire to know and embrace the God at the center of Christian worship, fellowship, and service. While liturgical churches have typically used a gradual-socialization model of spiritual formation, conversional churches have typically used a decision/follow-up model. It is becoming more clear to us that gradual-socialization churches need to call

children and young adults to intentional commitment and conversional churches need to attend to the gradual identity formation of disciple-making as modeled in Jesus’ three years with his disciples.

Such an approach should not be completely foreign to those familiar with the Hebrew Bible. In Deuteronomy, for instance, God tells Israel to “Impress [the commandments] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:5-9, *Today’s New International Version*). This passage suggests that children are to be taught through their interaction with the adults in their community. Indeed, in the Hebrew Bible, children are seen as important and necessary members of the community of faith (Csinos, 99). Furthermore, the liturgies of the Jewish festivals and feasts speak of children in the midst of the larger faith community. For example, during Passover, the wonderful narrative of God’s liberation of the Israelites from slavery cannot be told until the youngest child asks why those assembled are performing the rituals associated with the feast.

We are not arguing that children should never engage in spiritual formation apart from the larger community. At times, it is appropriate for children to meet separately for instruction and reflection especially tailored to their age-level needs and capabilities. However, the presumed importance of formal instruction has caused many churches, including emerging communities, to regularly exclude children from key congregational practices in order to teach them in “age-appropriate” educational models in spaces that are occupied solely by children. Such practices of segregation implicitly teach children that they are not a part of the wider faith community and that knowing the right information and being an

adult are necessary for a “real” relationship with God.

Learning through socialization occurs as children observe others who model the world views, values, and practices that are fundamental to the faith community. Especially important are contexts in which young people hear older people share honestly their stories of doubt, struggle, and failure, along with their most profound experiences of joy and triumph. Such embodiment of the community’s ethos can be carried out by children’s parents, as well as other adults in the congregation, for it is through encounters with such role models that the identity of children can be further formed and developed.

If emerging churches are to help their children to become devoted followers of Jesus, then it is important for them to demonstrate the practices and values that they want their children to internalize. Joyce Mercer has pointed out that “Every child always exists in multiple and often competing communities exercising formative, shaping influences on the child’s identity” (174). In order for the faith community to become the primary influence on the identity-formation of children, churches can welcome children into the wider community and grant them access to the entire gamut of practices, values, and world views that define the community, as well as adults who embody them. In such communities, children learn that they are valuable to the body of Christ, which, using the words of Jean Vanier, is “called to be a body where everybody is important” (Pascal). Parents are especially positioned to demonstrate the lifestyle of a follower of Jesus, for they, along with other primary caretakers, have a strong formative role in the spirituality of their children. Socialization into a Christian way of life, therefore, requires that congregations teach adults to embody the values and practices that they want to pass on to children. In addition, congregations can intentionally embrace the oath that they take as a child is dedicated or baptized. The

liturgies for such rituals typically include a congregational pledge that all members of the community will take responsibility for the raising of the child in the Christian faith.

Furthermore, it is important for churches to break out of a “Sunday morning is church” understanding of the faith community. If congregations instead define church as the people of God, wherever two or three are gathered in the name of the Lord, then children are by definition a part of any practices and activities in which the community engages, such as home churches or cell groups, acts of service or outreach, and congregational meals. By spending a great deal of time engaged with other members of the faith community, children are more likely to identify with and embrace the values of that community.

## Idea 2: Return to Catechesis

During the Enlightenment, a dichotomy between epistemology (knowing) and ontology (being) emerged, separating what one knows from whom one is and what one does. Indeed, Thomas Groome (2002) has stated that “the whole Enlightenment enterprise and thus modernity assumed that what we know need have little impact upon our ‘being’. (I mean ‘being’ as both noun and verb, who we are and how we live.)” (589). From a modern perspective, it is entirely possible for one to know about the Christian faith and life without putting any of this knowledge into practice.

As modernity draws to a close, the emerging church needs a model that not only presents faith concepts to children, but also inducts them into a Christian way of life. Speaking about discipleship within the church in general, David Fitch has argued that the church must (re)discover the ancient Christian practices of catechesis. We see great promise in this approach with children.

In the ancient world, the early church used forms of catechesis as a way of instructing those who were new to the

Christian faith. Converts gained an intellectual understanding of key Christian tenets while learning how to live the Gospel and participate in the community's rituals. Catechetical models of education usually lasted at least two or three years and formally ended with participants' baptisms (Torrence, 85). Many of the early church fathers, including St. Clement, St. Basil, and St. Jerome, created models of catechesis through which people were educated and inducted into the Christian way of life.

Throughout the history of the church, theologians have continued to speak of the value of catechesis for the spiritual development of children and newcomers. Such notable figures include St. Augustine, John Calvin, Karl Rahner, and John Westerhoff. The latter (1977) describes catechesis as:

a process that is without apology value laden, a process which aims to initiate persons into a particular community with its value, understandings and ways, a process which aims to aid persons to internalize the community's faith and to adopt this faith as their own.

A primary function of catechesis is to help the faithful individually and corporately meet the twofold responsibilities which faith asks of them: communion with God and communion with one's fellow human beings; that is, to nurture that intimacy of spiritual life which expresses itself in social justice, liberation, and the political struggle for whole community, peace and the well-being of all persons. (356-357)

Since emerging communities are often concerned with showing love to God through authentic worship and showing love to others by working for peace and justice, Westerhoff's (1977) description of catechesis is a welcome model for nurturing children in emerging congregations. It is echoed in the words of a character in *The Last Word and the Word*

*after That*: "[T]he purpose of the church in our way of thinking. . . is to spiritually form people to love God and others and themselves so that they can live life to the full in God's kingdom" (McLaren 2005, 141).

Catechesis in emerging communities can effectively form disciples of Christ if catechumens (those going through the process of catechesis) are included in the wider community of faith through communal worship. Instruction has a place in emerging catechesis as a supplement to worship, which is the primary activity of newcomers to the Christian community. In what follows, we will describe what catechesis might look like in emerging communities.

## Catechesis through Modeling the Teachings of Jesus

David Fitch has noted that "children need to learn the language and see the ways of life [of the church] modeled in community in order to grow" (220). In order for holistic and formational catechesis to exist, the community of faith must examine themselves to ensure that they are modeling the life in which they want their children to be formed. Children often follow the examples of the adults whom they encounter both in and out of the community of faith (Yust, 149). Yet Ron Sider (2005) has noted that many Christians (he focuses on Evangelicals) are not living according to the teachings of Jesus. Rather, they continue to divorce, have affairs, and amass possessions, all while neglecting the poor and marginalized. An environment modeling self-centeredness, exploitation, and narcissism encourages children to take on such characteristics as well.

Therefore, communities of faith might examine themselves with rigor, honesty, and a willingness to change, in order to free themselves of those qualities and characteristics that are contrary to the teachings of Jesus and the kingdom of God. They can resist the systemic and personal sins that so often infect those within the church. In the place of such

sinful characteristics, they can add equality, love, peace, justice, mercy, humility, and interdependence. And since failure to live up to the ideal of Jesus is inevitable and frequent, they can model a humble willingness to acknowledge shortcomings as individuals and as a community.

Rather than living like the rest of the world, a church committed to effective catechesis of children can be a community in which living the gospel message and the teachings of Jesus is normative; where turning the other cheek is modeled and considered normal for a Christian; where offering hospitality to the “other” (and the Other) is what a Christian does without much inner tension as to whether or not to offer it; where the values of the world are subverted by the values of the kingdom of God. Extending love, shalom, grace, and acceptance becomes what we do because of who we are—followers of Jesus. There is room for great diversity with regard to vocation and understandings of how to live in community, but it is inherent in the emerging church’s idea of authentic Christian living that a community will teach what it is, and thus its way of life is of paramount importance.

## **Grasping the Story through Catechesis**

Second, catechesis can provide an environment in which children can come to understand that God’s Story intersects with and informs their own stories. Catechetical models must place a priority not only on the words and actions of Jesus, but also on Christian narratives and the ways in which children find their places within them. All human beings live by narratives; for example, many people in today’s world live by the story of consumerism, which says “you are what you own.” Christian narratives are culturally specific ways in which God’s people interpret and enter into individual faith stories in terms of overarching and enduring theological themes.

God’s Story is not a distant, otherworldly narrative of individuals and communities that lived thousands of years ago. Biblical stories are part of an overarching Story of God’s relationship with the world over time. It is an ongoing, continuous Story that has the power to be formative, informative, and transformative for children and adults in all times and places.

This power is circumscribed when children’s ministry curricula reduce the biblical canon to a handful of disconnected stories that teach desirable moral stances or behaviors. Children cannot learn to recognize and celebrate the full theology of the church without access to a wide variety of stories from the whole of the biblical canon. Furthermore, children need opportunities to explore the connections among biblical stories and between the interwoven themes of those stories and their own lives. If children’s biblical literacy is limited to VeggieTales videos or the abbreviated lesson cycles of most church school materials, they may not develop an appropriate narrative of faith coherent with emerging church beliefs and practices.

Catechesis, as a way of nurturing the spirituality of young people, provides emerging communities with an approach that can be modeled after the words and actions of Jesus and enveloped within the Story of God. Children and new converts need extensive exposure to those who are following Jesus to learn what it looks and feels like to follow Jesus. Effective catechesis requires more than 30 to 90 minutes per week. Quantity, quality, intensity, and regularity are all important aspects of catechesis. Communities need to encourage regular patterns of worship that include weekly gatherings, daily practices and times of retreat and mission that draw children more fully into the catechizing community.

Herein lay the challenges for the church today. First, there is the challenge to move away from separate programs and back to intentional intergenerational communities of

Christian faith. It is within intentional inter-generational community that one learns best what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Such a community, which holds to the teachings of Jesus and knows its place within the Story of God is fit to nurture children through catechesis. Second, the church must accept the challenge to define catechesis in such a way that it does not become just another program. In the end, “catechesis is more than a given approach to curriculum. It is a way of being the church” (Fitch, 224).

### Idea 3. Reinvigorate Rites of Passage

Children and young people are in desperate need of rituals and celebrations that mark significant events in their lives. Although some such rituals exist, like baptism within the church, and graduation outside of the church, congregations can continue to develop and practice rites of passage that celebrate and mark significant moments along the precarious journey of growing up.

The omission of rites of passage in the lives of young people is not just an emerging church phenomenon. North American society in general lacks celebratory rituals for significant life events. Christian ethicist Paul Ramsey observes:

We are a civilization without “puberty rites,” without “rites of passage,” without rituals, ordeals, or vigils that the young must pass through to demonstrate that they can now be accepted as men and women among the elders. . . . So our youngsters have devised their own initiation ceremonies. For boys and girls, no longer being a virgin is one such rite of passage. For girls, getting pregnant is another ritual certification that they have attained, by rite, significance in their own right. This is all pitiful and very sad. (10-11)

Since Ramsey made this observation three decades ago, the situation has worsened. Some of the most popular movies among young people feature stories of pregnant teens and adolescents on a mission to have sex. Cathy Gulli suggests, “Unplanned pregnancy is now a pop-culture staple” (40). As a result, the teen birth rate in the United States actually increased in 2006 for the first time in fifteen years (Gulli, 40)!

Emerging communities who wish to nurture their children and help them form an identity within the church can include rites of passage within the life of community. By doing so, the community of faith can become a place where people pause to thank God and celebrate the lives of children. Young people in such a congregation might grow up witnessing and participating in rituals that mark important passages like these: births and adoptions, baptisms, coming of age and church membership or commitment (at puberty), graduation from secondary school and college, moving, going to a new school, starting a new job, engagement and marriage, divorce, unemployment, disability, bereavement, or other major life disruptions, midlife and/or the empty nest (when the youngest child finished high school or college), retirement, recovery from major illness, and death. They would gradually realize that childhood transitions are just as important in the life of faith as are the passages of adulthood. They would know they are truly seen and heard by the church.

Throughout the Bible, there is a recurring theme of God’s love and welcome being bestowed on children (Csinos). In the Hebrew Bible, children were seen as a precious gift from God. In the New Testament, Jesus welcomes children into his arms and affirms their place in the kingdom of God. One way of continuing this biblical message of welcome and affirmation is by celebrating children’s significant triumphs, efforts, and challenges along their journey through life.

## Idea 4: Work for Justice in an Unjust World

Many of the current forms and models of children's Christian education and spiritual formation have their roots in the American Sunday school movement of the early nineteenth century. Although this movement began as a response to poverty (especially among children), it focused solely on religious instruction once public schools opened (Lynn & Wright, 14-15). In order to reach children without generating overwhelming conflicts or debates, the movement kept silent on most controversial issues. For example, in the 1830s and 1840s, "the large Sunday school agencies never gave much attention to the black population [and] they were usually silent on slavery itself and abolition" (Lynn & Wright, 36-37). Thus, for the past two hundred years, children's religious education in Protestant America has been more attentive to moralistic religious instruction than social justice.

But as Bob Dylan once sang, "The times, they are a-changing." Many emerging faith communities are concerned with orphaned and impoverished children at home and around the world. They realize that the souls and the bodies of children are valuable in the eyes of God and in need of salvation (or liberation). As such, spiritual formation of children in emerging communities should be concerned with issues of social justice and advocacy for children whose common experiences include the injustices of war, famine, poverty, prostitution, and other manifestations of exploitation. After all, we live in a world in which 30,000 children die from preventable causes—like malnutrition and diarrhea—every single day (Couture, 3).

Nurturing all God's children means that emerging faith communities should be careful not to catch the "bless-me bug" (McLaren 2004a, 96), a virus that causes people to focus solely on how their actions can build up themselves and their church. Rather, the emerging movement should be looking to

catch the "bless-you bug," which infects individuals and congregations with Jesus' concern for the marginalized, oppressed, and poor. These people—the ones who were largely ignored by his society—were those to whom Jesus offered much of his attention. He proclaimed, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19 TNIV). If our gospel is not good news to the poor, it is not the good news of Jesus. So those in need must be of special importance in our communities and in our formation of young people.

How then can emerging communities reach out to children who suffer from injustice, both inside and outside of the walls of churches? How are they to care for poor and oppressed children in our churches, neighborhoods, cities, countries, and world? Since there are many faces of poverty, oppression, and exploitation, it would be ludicrous for us to present a step-by-step "how to" guide for wiping out poverty. Rather, what we offer are two broad approaches that we believe are important for understanding and seeking to eliminate injustice in the lives of children.

### Don't Just Pray About It

Praying for the end of injustice in the world is widely practiced in emerging circles. Prayers offered by individual Christians, entire faith communities, and mass gatherings of the faithful are undoubtedly heard by God and are important ways of helping God's kingdom come. But prayer by itself is not enough. We agree with David Fitch, who wrote, "Prayer is good but empty if we separate it from social justice" (153). It is important for those who wish to nurture children to do more than teach them to simply pray for justice; children also need to learn how to embody their



prayers by engaging in practices that bring justice for all children in a world of injustice.

Globally, children make up the largest and most vulnerable people group. In times of famine, war, disease, and hatred, children usually suffer more than anyone else. Just look at the statistics:

- Every year almost ten million children will die from preventable causes.
- An estimated 158 million children aged 5-14 are engaged in child labor—one in six children in the world (UNICEF, “Child Labour,” para. 1). Many of the products made by these children are found in North American homes.
- There are hundreds of thousands child soldiers in the world, in both armed rebel groups and government forces (Human Rights Watch, “Child Soldiers, para 1)
- Each year as many as 1.2 million children are trafficked, with many forced into child prostitution (UNICEF, “Child Trafficking,” para. 1). In North America, almost 300,000 children under 18 years of age are sexually exploited (Estes & Weiner, 11-12).
- Over 46 million Americans are without health insurance (Sider 2007, 173), many of whom are single mothers and their children.
- At the age of seventeen, the average Black or Latino student in the U.S. reads at the same level as thirteen-year-old white Americans (Sider 2007, 194).
- One in six children in the U.S. lives in poverty (Save the Children, “Child Poverty,” para. 1).

These appalling statistics demonstrate that children are at the frontlines of injustices in our home nation and throughout the world. Therefore they ought to be at the forefront of the church’s fight against

injustice. As UNICEF (“Poverty Reduction”) has stated:

Breaking this cycle of poverty depends on investments by governments, civil society and families in children’s rights and wellbeing, and in women’s rights. Spending on a child’s health, nutrition, education, and social, emotional and cognitive development, and on achieving gender equality, is not only an investment in a more democratic and a more equitable society, it is also an investment in a healthier, more literate and, ultimately, more productive population. Investing in children is morally the right thing to do. (para. 3)

Faith communities in the emerging movement need to step up, take responsibility for injustice, and actively fight for the rights of children worldwide. When they do so with, and on behalf of, their own children, they both model the value of social justice and bring all children closer to life in God’s just and peaceable kingdom.

## See the Tears in their Eyes

In order to truly engage in ministries which release the oppressed from poverty, disease, and harmful systems and power structures, “we must be prepared to look at the tears of the oppressed” (Frost, 263). In this regard, we should not consider the spiritual formation of our children complete until we have inducted them into a way of life that includes those with special needs, and live such a life ourselves.

Shane Claiborne says the tragedy of rich American (and we could expand to Western) Christians today is not that they “do not care about the poor, but that they do not know the poor” (11). Adults, with their children, need to find ways to engage in regular contact with those who are poor, oppressed, suffering, or disabled. It is not enough to embark on a short-term mission trip during which little

personal contact takes place with those who are being “ministered to,” and patronizing impulses are reinforced. And we do not need to travel across the globe to witness desperate poverty—we only need to walk to the ghettos and projects in our own cities. With this in mind we need to imagine ways that preschool, elementary, middle, and high school children, as well as young adults, are connected with the poor and oppressed in a personal way at deepening levels of intensity. For example, a suburban preschool child might begin with her family sponsoring a child in Africa. In her elementary years, she might experience a summer exchange program with Native American children, leading to an inner-city immersion in middle school, followed by spending a summer among the urban poor in high school. Or a family might affiliate with a single helping organization, such as Habitat for Humanity, and involve their children first in limited contact activities (fundraising, food contributions), then at a moderate level (landscaping and words of support), and finally in full engagement (building alongside family members). This investment in a child’s spiritual, social, and missional education would probably have a greater return than many other investments in religious education.

In *Just Generosity*, Ron Sider states, “[I]f we do not imitate God’s concern for the poor, we are not really God’s people—no matter how frequent our worship or how orthodox our creeds” (70). One of the marks of a true disciple of Christ and child of God is a love and concern for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized that goes beyond mere charity. To truly love our oppressed neighbors, it is important to take the time to get to know them, understand their situations, and work with them to overcome their oppression and poverty. This is the type of action that Paulo Freire called for when he said “Revolutionary leaders cannot think without the people, nor for the people, but only with the people” (131). Children grow in faith when they think and

act with those who suffer injustice and oppression.

Harvard psychologist Robert Coles has noted that “children add up, imitate, file away what they’ve observed” (7); they learn by watching and listening to adults. If we want them to help form a world of justice, we cannot simply preach to our children about God’s concern for the poor; we need to be willing to get our hands dirty as we actively pursue peace and justice with our children by our sides. Only then will they be able to truly know the immense value of those who are oppressed and the great importance of working for justice in an unjust world.

## Conclusion: Companions on the Journey

Throughout the Christian church, people are beginning to feel that things are changing. Whatever labels one might use to distinguish and describe this movement, something is undeniably happening: a new kind of Christianity (or perhaps a recovery of an older Christianity, or a combination of both the old and new) is emerging. Yet as people experience these changes and seek to be refreshed by them, children are being left behind.

In this article, we have begun to explore ways that this new, emerging Christian culture can nurture and form children into authentic disciples of Christ. While the four ideas we present—inclusion, catechesis, rites of passage, and justice-seeking—are not exclusive methods for forming the faith identity of children, we believe they are consistent with the values and practices of the emerging church movement.

None of these four ideas stands alone from the other three. Rather, they continually intersect and overlap with one another, even to the point where it is difficult to distinguish where one ends and the other begins. Rites of passage have a key role within practices of catechesis and, like catechesis, they require

children to be included within the wider faith community. Such inclusion is intricately linked with justice, for, as Ron Sider has noted, “Justice includes helping people return to the kind of life in community that God intends for them” (72). Justice requires catechesis and rites of passage, for as Marva Dawn has noted: “Without that mentoring [of catechumenal practices]. . . persons cannot be trained to ‘live’ their focal concerns” (84) of justice-seeking and peacemaking. The approaches that we have presented require one another. By adopting all four foci as part of a holistic religious education ministry, emerging communities of faith can nurture children who love God and passionately desire to follow the way of Jesus.

“Jesus has taught us that the way to know what God is like is not by determining our philosophical boundary conditions/ definitions/delineations before departing, but rather the way to know is by embarking on an adventure of faith, hope, and love, even if you don’t know where your path will lead” (McLaren, 2004b, 184-185). Our job is not simply to fill the minds of children with facts about God and the Bible. The task before us is to walk with children as we together seek to love God and fellow human beings more and more each day. While at times we may lead children along the path, we can also open ourselves to their leadership along this spiritual journey. After all, “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Mark 10:14, TNIV).

## Works Cited

Beckwith, I. *Formational Children’s Ministry: Shaping children using story, ritual, and relationship*. Grand Rapids: Baker., 2010

Beckwith, I. *Postmodern Children’s Ministry: Ministry to children in the 21st century*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.

Bushnell, H. *Christian Nurture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1888.

Claiborne, S. “Downward Mobility in an Upscale World.” *The Other Side* 36 (6), 11-15, 2000.

Clark, M. H. *Where are the Children?* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975

Coles, R. *The Moral Intelligence of Children: How to raise a moral child*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1997.

Couture, P. D. *Child Poverty: Love, justice, and social responsibility*. St. Louis: Chalice, 2007.

Csinos, D. “The Biblical Theme of Welcoming Children.” *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 8, 97-117, 2007.

Dawn, M. J. *Unfettered Hope: A call to faithful living in an affluent society*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003.

Dylan, B. “The Times They are A-Changin’”. *On The Times They are a-Changin’* [Record]. New York: Columbia Records. 1964.

Estes, R. J. & Weiner, N. A. “The Commercial Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico.” Retrieved July 30, 2008, from [http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/~restes/CSEC\\_Files/ Exec\\_Sum\\_020220.pdf](http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/~restes/CSEC_Files/Exec_Sum_020220.pdf), 2001.

Fitch, D. E. *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the mission of the church from big business, parachurch organizations, psychotherapy, consumer capitalism, and other modern maladies*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005

Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary edition. New York: Continuum, 2007.

Frost, M. *Exiles: Living missionally in a post-Christian culture*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006.

Groome, T. H. “Religious Education and Catechesis: No Divorce, for the Children’s Sake.” *The Furrow* 52 (11), 587-596, 2002.

Groome, T. H. *Christian Religious Education: Sharing our story and vision*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980.

Gulli, C. “Suddenly Teen Pregnancy is Cool?” *Maclean’s*, January 28, 2008, 40-44.

Human Rights Watch. (n.d.). *Child Soldiers*. Retrieved July 30, 2008, from <http://hrw.org/campaigns/crp/index.htm>

Lynn, R. W. and Wright, E. *The Big Little School: Sunday child of American Protestantism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971

McLaren, B. D. *The Last Word and the Word after That: A tale of faith, doubt, and a new kind of Christianity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

McLaren, B. D. (2004a). "Bless this House?: Why efforts to renew the church are often misguided." *Leadership* 25 (3), 2004, 96.

McLaren, B. D. (2004b). *A Generous Orthodoxy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.

Mercer, J. A. *Welcoming Children: A practical theology of childhood*. St. Louis: Chalice, 2005.

Pascal, K. (producer/director). *Belonging: The search for acceptance* [Motion picture]. Markham, ON: Windborne Productions, 2002.

Ramsey, P. "Do You Know Where your Children Are?" *Theology Today* 36 (1), 1979, 10-21.

Save the Children. (n.d.). *Child Poverty*. Retrieved July 30, 2008, from <http://www.savethechildren.org/programs/us-literacy-and-nutrition/index.html>

Sider, R. J. *Just Generosity: A new vision for overcoming poverty in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Baker. 2007.

Sider, R. J. (2005). *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians living just like the rest of the world?* Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

Torrence, T. F. *Catechism*. In *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Education*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963.

UNICEF. (n.d.). *Child Labour*. Retrieved July 30, 2008, from [http://www.unicef.org/protection/index\\_childlabour.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_childlabour.html).

UNICEF. (n.d.). *Child Trafficking*. Retrieved July 30, 2008, from [http://www.unicef.org/protection/index\\_exploitation.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_exploitation.html)

UNICEF. (n.d.). *Poverty Reduction Starts with Children*. Retrieved July 30, 2008, from [http://www.unicef.org/why/why\\_poverty.html](http://www.unicef.org/why/why_poverty.html).

Westerhoff, J. H. III. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Revised ed. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse. 2000.

Westerhoff, J. H. III. "A Call to Catechesis." *The Living Light* 14(3), 1975, 354-8.

Yust, K.-M. *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for nurturing children's spiritual lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

## Children, Youth, and a New Kind of Christianity

As one of the presenting partners of the 2012 Children, Youth and a New Kind of Christianity Conference (C.Y.N.K.C.), which took place in Washington, DC, on May 7-10, Wood Lake Publishing is proud to host downloadable podcasts of presentations from that event. New podcasts will be added periodically, so please visit often.

Download Christian Faith (and) The Next Generation by Brian McLaren

Download Changing Times, Changing Responses Part 1 by Rev. Dr. John H. Westerhoff, III

Download Changing Times, Changing Responses Part 2 by Rev. Dr. John H. Westerhoff, III

<http://children-youth.com>

In May of 2012, 450 leaders, ministers, volunteers, parents, and students gathered in Washington, DC, USA to spark conversations about youth and children within a new kind of Christianity. They spoke about innovative practices, critical issues, and controversial topics like violence, racism, and sexuality. They embarked on a journey together to engage in life-giving ministry with young people. And they blazed a new trail for the 21st-century church.

Podcasts of the sessions are being made available on their website at <http://children-youth.com> and on the Wood Lake Books at [www.woodlakebooks.com/podcasts](http://www.woodlakebooks.com/podcasts).



# Ministry with Today's Children & Families

Dale Hudson

**T**he postmodern family is a reflection of the postmodern culture as a whole. To understand the roots of the postmodern culture, you must go to its predecessor—modernism. Modernism developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the wake of modern industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities. With the emerging fully industrialized world, modernism felt religious faith was outdated and that mankind could obtain a higher way of living through science, reason, and logic. It rejected the idea of a compassionate, all-powerful Creator and declared that science is the only way truth can be verified.

The failings of modernism were made apparent by two World Wars, the Holocaust, and Vietnam. People begin to question the results of reason and science with its cold technology, pollution, weapons of mass destruction, and intrusive “control.”

After World War II, a desire to be free from any kind of intellectual demand or moral restraint led to the birth of postmodernism. Idealism, pluralism, relativism, and skepticism became the approach to knowledge and understanding.

From the 1980's to the present, postmodernism has accelerated. It claims there is no absolute truth. No one view is uniquely correct. Truth is not found in absolutes but is created in each person's mind. Everything is in the eye of the beholder and any claim of “fact” is the mere disillusionment of a preconceived bias.

---

**Dale Hudson** has been in children's ministry for over 23 years and is currently director of children's ministry at Christ Fellowship Church in Palm Beach, FL. His website, [www.relevantchildrensministry.com](http://www.relevantchildrensministry.com), provides fresh content, ideas, and insight for children's ministry leaders. He is the co-author of *Turbo Charged Children's Ministry*, *Turbo Charged Preschool Ministry*, *Children's Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and the *ChurchLeaders.com Top 100* book. Dale's passion is helping children and families discover God's life-changing grace, and encouraging and equipping children's ministry leaders. You can connect with Dale via email ([daleh@cftoday.org](mailto:daleh@cftoday.org)), Twitter (@dalehudsoncm), or Facebook.

Postmodern culture's mantra is tolerance and being nonjudgmental. It distains religious authority. There is no fixed moral code. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25). Whatever works for each person.

The postmodern culture has critical implications for your ministry as you seek to minister to families. We live in a day of unparalleled challenges and opportunities. Family is rapidly being restructured and we must know how to navigate through these changes.

I Chronicles 12:32 highlights the leadership of 200 of Israel's finest leaders: "From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All of these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take."

These leaders understood public affairs, the temper of the nation, and the tendencies of their culture. This helped them know the best course of action to take.

Just as a missionary takes time to study and learn about the culture he is trying to reach, so we must understand the characteristics and tendencies of the culture God has called us to.

Let's explore four key areas of effective family ministry in a postmodern world. It begins by understanding postmodern families.

## Understanding Postmodern Families

The "modern" family consisted of a male breadwinner, female homemaker and children. The postmodern family is much more diverse.

The families portrayed on television provide us with a snapshot of the changes in postmodern family dynamics.

*Leave it to Beaver* embodied the family structure of the 1950's. It was a nuclear family where two parents; a man and a woman, raised their biological children, usually two of

them. The father, Ward, was the breadwinner in the Cleaver family. He was in charge of the household and held an important role as a parenting figure. June, the mother, was a homemaker who stayed at home and did the regular activities of a housewife; she cleaned and cooked.



**Leave it to Beaver (1950s)**

Wally and Beaver (Theodore) portrayed the two children. The first one, Wally was the teenager in the family. He represented a well-rounded, American boy who got good grades, got along with his teachers, and played sports. Beaver, was the seven year-old who enjoyed playing with his friends, reading comic books, and attending church. Though he got into minor trouble, it was usually easily resolved.

Fast forward to present day. *Modern Family*, seen on ABC, depicts three families from today's culture. First you have the typical family with a wife and husband with their three kids. Though Phil, the husband, is the primary breadwinner, Claire, the wife, is seen as the head of the household.

Next, you have a divorced man, Jay, who is remarried to a younger woman named Gloria. Gloria is also the mother of Manny, a young boy, who Jay takes under his wing as his own

child even though he is not the biological father. Once again, Jay, the male, is the primary breadwinner, but by no means is he the head of the household when it comes to the family.

The last family structure we see in *Modern Family* consists of two gay men and an adopted child. Mitchell, the more masculine of the two, works outside of the home and provides for the family while Cam stays home and cares for Lily, their daughter.



**Modern Family on ABC (present day)**

Let's delve deeper into the postmodern worldview and landscape of family.

### Family Structure

- 34% of people say a growing variety of family arrangements is a good thing; 29% say it is a bad thing and 32% say it makes little or no difference.
- 86% say a single parent and child constitute a family.
- 80% say an unmarried couple living together with a child is a family.
- 63% say a gay or lesbian couple raising a child is a family.

### Marriage

- In 1960, nearly 70% of adults were married compared to only 50% now.

- In 1960, 68% of all twenty-somethings were married. Today just 26% are.
- Americans are waiting about five years longer to marry than they did in 1970.
- College graduates are now far more likely to marry (64%) than those with no higher education (48%).
- Marriage is no longer considered a prerequisite for parenthood. Over the past 50 years, the number of children born to unwed mothers has risen from 5% to 41%.
- In 1960, 87% of children lived with two married parents compared to only 64% today.

### Children

- 34% of 18 to 29 year olds already have children.
- There were more babies born in 2007 than at the height of the baby boom.
- 39% of households headed by young postmodern parents have children under 18 in the home.

### Cohabitation

- In 1981, an ABC News/Washington Post poll revealed that 45% of people disapproved of couples living together unmarried. By 2007, a similar question in a Gallup/USA Today poll revealed the disapproval rate had dropped to 27%.
- Cohabitation has soared 17-fold from 430,000 in 1960 to 7.5 million last year.
- Today's children are much more likely to spend time in a cohabiting household than they are to see their parents divorce.
- 24% of children are born to cohabiting couples, which means that more children are currently born to cohabiting couples than to single mothers.
- Another 20% of children will spend time in a cohabiting household with an unrelated adult at some point in their childhood.

- This means that over 40% of children are exposed to a cohabiting relationship.
- Taxpayers are spending a trillion dollars a year to subsidize non-marriage—75 percent federal and 25 percent by states.

### Single Parents

- There are approximately 13.7 million single parents in the United States today, and those parents are responsible for raising 21.8 million children (approximately 26% of children under 21).
- 84% of single parents are mothers.
- The poverty rate among single mothers with less than a high school diploma is over 45%.

### Pre-Marital Sex

- In 1969, 68% of the public believed pre-marital sex was wrong. By 1985, only 39% believed it was wrong. In 2009, a CBS/New York Times poll revealed only 32% believed it was wrong.

### Divorce

- America's divorce rate began climbing in the late 1960's and skyrocketed in the '70's and early '80's. The rate peaked at 5.3 divorces per 1,000 people in 1981. It has since dropped to 3.6 and is at the lowest rate since 1970. Many experts say the rate is primarily down because of couples cohabitating without marrying.
- 55% of divorced couples share custody of their children.

### Family Roles

- 71% of mothers with children under 18 are in the labor force. In 1975, fewer than half of all mothers were working outside the home. Even among mothers of children under 3, 61% are in

the labor force compared to 34% in 1975.

- When asked in 2009 whether they agreed or disagreed that women should return to their traditional roles in society, only 19% of adults agreed while 75% disagreed.
- In 1960, women comprised only 33% of the workforce. By 2009, women made up 47% of the workforce.
- There are an estimated 154,000 stay-at-home dads who care for 287,000 children.
- 62% of people endorse the modern marriage in which both the husband and wife both work and both take care of the household and children. This is up from 47% in 1977.

### Same Sex Marriage

- 53% of adults younger than 30 favor allowing same sex marriage.
- 48% of adults ages 30 to 45 favor allowing same sex marriage.
- 38% of adults ages 46 to 64 favor allowing same sex marriage.
- 29% of adults ages 65 and older favor allowing same sex marriage.

### Multi-Generational Households

- According to Census Bureau, the number of Americans living in multi-generational households has shot up, increasing to 4.9 million, or 10.5%.
- This includes grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. Over 2.9 children are being raised with their grandparents as their primary caregiver.
- The primary reason for this increase is due to the economic downturn. The unemployed are much more likely to live in multi-generational households. It is natural that more people would reach out to family for financial support.



## Religious Beliefs

- 70% believe there is more than one way to God.
- 64% believe God is real.
- 55% believe evolution is the best explanation of how we got here.
- Only 28% believe the Bible is God's Word.
- 25% are not affiliated with any religion.

## Technology

- One defining characteristic of young postmodern families is technology. They grew up totally tech connected.
- 88% use texting.
- 90% use the internet.
- 75% have a profile on a social network.
- 25% have a video of themselves online.

These findings provide us with insight into the culture we are ministering to. Let's translate this into practical ways we can reach postmodern families for Christ.

## Reaching Postmodern Families

It is easy to get bogged down and even discouraged by these statistics. But the good news is postmodern families are searching for the truth. They are looking for something to fill the empty void in their lives that only God can satisfy. God is at work. Churches and ministries that are reaching out to today's families with wisdom and love are seeing God change their hearts and lives—one family at a time. Here are some things churches can do to reach postmodern families.

- ✓ **Embrace Racial Diversity**  
Postmodern families are the most racially diverse in American history, yet Sunday morning remains one of the most segregated hours of the week. Churches must be intentional about making everyone in their community feel welcome

and loved. This includes reflecting racial diversity in communication pieces, staffing, and cultural awareness.

- ✓ **Focus on urban and suburban communities.**  
Only 14% of young postmodern parents live in rural areas compared to 29% of Boomers and 36% of the Silent Generation. Yes, we need churches in rural areas, but if we are going to reach the young postmodern family, we must go where they are. Churches must be planted in urban and suburban communities.
- ✓ **Make a good first impression on new families.**  
The first impression is a lasting impression. And you only get one opportunity to make it. If families don't have a good experience on their first visit to your church, they probably won't come back, no matter how much you "follow up" with them. Take these steps to exceed their expectations on their first visit.
- ✓ **Have a separate check-in area for guests.**  
Even though people are used to having to wait in line, they hate it. Exceed their expectations by taking them out of the normal check-in line and give them an "express line" experience
- ✓ **Give guests a gift.**  
They expect to get brochures and "information." Exceed their expectations and give them a gift. Want to really exceed their expectations? Instead of giving them a "church-related gift" like a CD of the sermon, give them a gift that is non-church related like a Starbucks gift card.
- ✓ **Walk them to their child's classroom.**  
They are used to being pointed in the general direction. Exceed their

expectations and “walk” them to the classroom.

✓ **Walk the parents to the adult service.**

Don't just stop at walking them to their child's classroom. Take the next step and then walk the parents to the adult service.

✓ **Show genuine interest in them.**

Good children's ministries are polite. Exceptional children's ministries are personable. Move beyond the “hello” at the door and take time to talk with them and get to know them.

✓ **Bend the guidelines to accommodate them.**

Many times guests will ask for special accommodations such as allowing two siblings of different ages to be in the same classroom. Unless their request violates your safety and security procedures, do your best to accommodate them. Look for ways to say “yes” instead of saying “no.”

✓ **Remember their name and use it.**

It makes an impression on people when you immediately remember their name. Work on techniques that help you memorize people's names instantly.

✓ **Help them after the worship service.**

Most guests aren't expecting you to go the second mile and help them after the service. Exceed their expectations by being there to help them check out their children, answer questions, thank them for coming, etc.

✓ **Make the safety and security of children a top priority.**

Postmodern parents have been psychologically impacted by 9/11, terrorism, and buildings being bombed. They live with a sense of danger in the world. They

have intercoms and security cameras in their child's rooms. We must make the safety and security of their children a top priority while they are in our care. Here are some key steps to take to gain the confidence and trust of parents.

- *Have secure buildings and proper plans and systems in place such as a secure check-in/check-out system. Parents must know that no one else can pick up their child.*
- *Let parents know every volunteer has been through an orientation process, which includes a background check and screening. Put it in writing and regularly remind parents. Knowing there are only approved volunteers in the room will help build trust.*
- *Have a rule that no adult is ever alone with a child and let parents know this.*
- *Issue pagers or use numbers on screen to notify parents when they are needed. This will give parents a sense of security and will help them feel more comfortable entrusting their child with you.*
- *Fill out incident reports. Kids are going to fall down, they are going to get bumps, scratches from other children, etc. Hardly a week goes by without it happening. The key is how you respond and communicate with parents. Have incident reports. Anytime there is an accident, bump, scratch, etc. fill out an incident report. Write down exactly what happened. When the parents come to pick up their child, share the incident report with them and have them sign it. This will build trust. Trust is depleted if they go home and discover a bump or scratch and were not told about it.*

✓ **Be committed to a ministry of excellence.**

Postmodern parents have high expectations of institutions and authorities. Our “competition” is not the church down the street. It’s Disney, Target, or the last business or restaurant they interacted with. We must pay fantastic attention to detail. Excellence is doing the small details well.

This includes keeping children’s rooms clean. When postmodern parents look inside your classroom, they assess its cleanliness. If it’s untidy, cluttered, or dirty, it is difficult to gain their trust. Keep toys clean and disinfected, throw away or repair damaged furniture, keep the floor vacuumed, and the trash emptied.

Another important detail is following proper adult-to-child ratios. A room that is too crowded or understaffed will damage your credibility with parents.

✓ **Foster relationships and create community.**

Postmoderns are highly relational. They prefer circles instead of rows. The larger your ministry becomes, the smaller it must become. Small groups are a vital part of this process. How this is accomplished will vary from church to church. The key is creating environments where relationships are built and people are known and cared for.

## Ministry with Postmodern Families

The church is called to be a hospital for the spiritually sick, not a museum where perfect Christians are on display. People come into a hospital bleeding, coughing, and hurting. It is messy—very messy.

And that’s right where Jesus wants us. He was called the “Friend of Sinners.” He did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

We must draw people to the truth while not driving them away from it. If we are reaching our community, we will have people attending our church whose lives do not line up with God’s best plan for the family.

Our calling must be to lovingly share the truth with them and then provide pathways for them to move toward it. If we are going to tell people where they should be, then we must provide the steps they can take to get there.

✓ **Interview people before you allow them to teach children.**

✓ **Increase the number of men involved in ministry with children.**

The ever-increasing percentage of children being raised by a single parent can affect the child’s balance of male-female influence growing up. This is especially true with boys. We must bring godly male figures into their lives. Things like a men’s mentoring program or having men lead boy’s small groups makes a big difference.

✓ **Offer support, encouragement, and counseling for children affected by divorce.**

Many children are affected by divorce. I counsel with many families whose children are angry, upset, and acting out at school because of their parent’s divorce. We must be there to offer support, encouragement, and counseling. Programs like “Divorce Recovery For Kids” can help children cope with the pain of divorce.

✓ **Equip couples we marry.**

We must do a better job up front of equipping couples we marry. Churches marry 86% of Americans, but I am afraid we fail them many times. Protestant

divorce rates are actually higher than the unchurched. We must focus on pre-marital counseling at a new level. We must provide the skills they need for success going into the marriage.

✓ **Provide hope and strategies for couples that are having trouble.**

Recent research reports that about 60 percent of divorces are by couples that are no more unhappy than those who remain married and have “low levels of conflict.” Over 2,500 couples were surveyed and found that 40% of those well into the divorce process, say that “one or both of them are interested in the possibility of reconciliation.”

A “Second Chances Act” has been proposed that would set a one-year “cooling off” period before a divorce can become final. It would also encourage spouses to send their mates an “early notification and divorce prevention letter,” warning that a divorce was likely if problems were not resolved. The proposal would also require parents of minor children to attend divorce education classes before they can file for divorce. This would allow churches more time and opportunities to provide help with counseling and reconciliation.

✓ **Provide special attention to cohabitating couples.**

Cohabitation is rapidly on the rise. If we are going to disciple cohabitating couples we must:

- *Be about redemption.* We must be a place where people can discover God’s grace and forgiveness.
- *Speak the truth in love.* There has to be a balance between love and truth. It’s like the two wings of a plane. One won’t fly without the other. Communicate God’s truth about

marriage with a heart of love and compassion. When people know you truly care for them, it will open their heart to receive the truth.

- *Establish guidelines.* It is important to have clear guidelines in areas that are related to cohabiting. Will you allow parents who are cohabiting to serve in children’s ministry? Will you allow parents who are cohabiting to participate in child dedication? These are questions that each church must address and answer for themselves. The biblical reasons behind your guidelines should be clearly communicated.
- *Have pathways in place.* As stated earlier, when you challenge parents to line up with God’s Word, it’s important to have pathways in place that will help them get there. When you explain “why” be ready to show them “how.” Provide them next steps such as a prep-for-marriage course or counseling.
- *Work hand-in-hand with adult ministries.* Partner with adult ministries to create the pathways mentioned above. Many times, the first time parents will share they are cohabiting will come through their interaction with children’s ministry. Being able to easily connect them with adult ministries is vital.

When you minister to parents who are cohabiting, it can be difficult at times. I regularly meet cohabiting couples that attend our church. I am praying it will be the beginning of a journey of them discovering God’s plan for the family. Our job is not to call them “out” but to call them “up.” Some will pull away when they hear the truth, but others will follow God’s Word and you will see their lives and

family changed forever. I've seen both happen, and had the joy of seeing parents who were cohabiting get married. Just remember, we can't change anyone's heart. Only God can do that. It's simply our job to speak God's truth in love.

## Partnering with Postmodern Families

The most important factor in a child's spiritual life is his or her parents. No one has more influence. The time a child will spend in children's ministry is a small fraction compared to the time the child will spend with his or her parents.

We must spend as much time focusing on parents as we do children. We have to shift much of our time, energy, and resources toward partnering with adult ministries, toward discipling parents, toward equipping parents to lead their children spiritually, toward helping parents have strong marriages.

If we want to see children's lives changed, then we have to see their parents' lives and marriages changed. ***We don't need more children's ministry. We need more marriage and parent ministry.*** What happens at home is just as important, if not more important, than what happens at church.

The good news is that studies show that young postmodern parents are more focused on their family than their Boomer parents were. A defining characteristic is involvement in their children's lives. They are home more with their children. Consider this. . .

- 76% say they have no interest in gaining their manager's position. Much of this mindset comes from seeing their older bosses spend long hours at the office to the neglect of their families and personal lives. They would rather pass on the promotion that involves longer hours and instead go

home to be with their kids. They have memories from their own childhood of lonely afternoons and early evenings because their parents were working long hours. They want to be there for their children.

- Ironically, they are working more hours than their parents, but the big difference is they are working smarter. Technology is allowing them the ability to work from home a lot more. A recent study shows there has been a 61% increase in people working from home since 2005. This gives them flexibility in their schedule and the ability to spend more time with their family at home.
- 52% say that being a good parent is one of the most important things in life.

The church has a great opportunity to partner with postmodern parents. They want to take the lead in discipling their children. If we place the proper tools in their hands, they will step up to the plate spiritually for their children. Let's look at some effective ways to do this.

### ✓ Provide parents with easy-to-use discipleship resources and tools.

Many parents feel like they can't effectively disciple their children unless they are a Bible scholar. Encourage parents by providing them simple, user-friendly resources.

### ✓ Don't program them to death.

Don't add too much to their already crazy, busy schedules and then guilt them for not being there. Families make choices with their time. If you are constantly expecting them to be at the church for extra programs or events, they can become disheartened and overwhelmed. Be strategic in what you do. Work with the

other ministries in the church when planning your calendar.

✓ **Strategically look at family calendars when planning your church calendar.**

Take into consideration holidays, days school is out, 3-day weekends, spring breaks, graduation dates, etc. when planning. Make sure you place key events, classes, etc. at times when it won't be competing with other family events.

✓ **Partner with other ministries.**

Become best friends with student ministry, adult ministry, senior adult's ministry, women's ministry, and men's ministry. Work closely with them and together create a strategy to influence families. Here's an example. We sat down with adult ministries and shared with them the child dedication class dates for next year. They purposely created parenting and marriage classes that will roll out of the child dedication class dates.

✓ **Set up key family milestones you celebrate with them.**

There are key times in a family's life when they swing the doors wide open and invite you to bring influence into their home. Set up classes and celebrations for milestones like child dedication, baptism, pre-teen passage, high school graduation, etc.

✓ **Be just as intentional about building relationships with parents as you are with children.**

Spend intentional time talking with parents, going to adult ministry activities, attending adult worship, etc. When you build relationships with parents, you open their hearts to receive your influence.

✓ **Find out their needs as a family.**

What are they struggling with? What challenges are they dealing with as

parents? What is their home life like? How can you best minister to them? This is done through the step above as you build relationships with families and spend time listening to them. You can also host a parent focus group a few times a year and intentionally ask these type of questions.

✓ **Provide activities and events for families to enjoy together.**

Postmodern families emphasize family activities above material things. Provide shared learning experiences, family picnics, family activity nights, family worship nights, family camps, family concerts, family fall festivals—all great ways to get families together so you can speak into their lives.

✓ **Be prepared to minister to families when they are going through difficult times.**

God wants to work through you to influence families when they are at the hospital, when they are seeking counseling, when they are mourning at the funeral home, when they are in financial crisis.

✓ **Involve grandparents.**

Postmodern parents are in much closer contact with their parents than previous generations. In many families, grandparents are closely attached to helping raise the grandkids. In fact, 25% of young parents have their child's grandparents involved in the child's activities. There are also 5.8 million grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.

✓ **Get them involved in serving in children's ministry at church.**

They want to see their children succeed and grow spiritually. They are willing to volunteer in their children's activities.

✓ **Provide opportunities for families to serve together.**

Families can be greeters together. Families can go on mission trips together. Families can participate in community service projects together. Last year we hosted a family yard sale. Each family brought items from home and set up a table in the church parking lot. They raised over \$1,300 that went toward stopping human trafficking. At Thanksgiving, we prepare meals for the needy in our community. It is wonderful seeing families participating in this together.

✓ **Know how to effectively communicate with them.**

Here are some factors to consider as you communicate with young postmodern parents.

- *They are bombarded with information.* The average adult is flooded with over 247 messages a day. With this influx of messages, it is a challenge to get your message through the clutter and into their hands.
- *They have very short attention spans.* The attention span may be an endangered species in the lightning-fast, multimedia society we've become. With media overload continuing to amp up, the ability to grab people's attention and hold it is an increasing challenge.

New research finds that the average political sound bite—defined as any footage of a candidate speaking uninterrupted—has dropped to just eight seconds. (About the time it took to you read that last sentence.) To give that information some context, consider that, during the 1968 presidential election, the average sound bite was a full 43 seconds. And as recently as the 1990s, CBS said it

wouldn't broadcast any sound bite under 30 seconds in an effort to better promote informed, complex discourse. Two decades later, candidates get out about a third of that before cutting them off.

According to the *Pediatrics* medical journal, increased exposure to television and video games causes noticeable decreases in attention spans in children. One study says the average attention span of university students is 10 minutes.

There are three words you will be hearing more often: "It's Too Long." The video—it's too long. The lesson—it's too long. The announcement—it's too long. The brochure—it's too long. The email—it's too long. The advertisement—it's too long.

This means when you are communicating with young parents you must *say it short*. Complexity is your enemy. If you want parents to remember something long term, then make it a simple statement. Great communicators know how to take complex truths and teach them in simple statements.

The fewer the words, the bigger the impact. Here's an example. Finish this sentence. The Few, the Proud, the \_\_\_\_\_. The reason you were able to finish the sentence is because it is in your long-term memory. It is in your long-term memory because it's six words. If it were 60 words, you probably wouldn't remember it.

Also remember to *show it short*. Keep your training and teaching videos at 2-3 minutes max.

And don't forget to *write it short*. Print pieces should be short and to the point. That long, wordy brochure you created, no one is reading it. Cut out most of the words and use pictures with simple, short statements.

- *They want immediate response.* With mobile devices, text, twitter, and email they are used to getting a quick response. Respond to them within 24 hours.
  - *Communicate with them through text.* Did you know that 98% of text messages get read? Every Tuesday, we send out a short text with questions from the weekend lesson that parents can discuss with their child at home. Parents can sign up to receive the text. We've had great response. There are many text services available that enable you to do this. We currently use [www.txtsignal.com](http://www.txtsignal.com).
- ✓ **Provide them with parental advice.** Postmodern parents are very open to parental advice. Online parenting information has exploded online. Alltop.com contains links to hundreds of blogs and content sites under its "mom's" section. It features perspectives from all manner of moms: single and married.

Facebook has also become a place to share parenting advice. Young parents live on Facebook and this contributes to parenting becoming an increasingly public, not private, experience. Respond by creating online parenting support such as a Facebook page or website. Offer parenting classes at church.

## Conclusion

When we reach and disciple a family we make an impact for generations to come. My family is a personal example of this. There was a

time when we knew nothing about God. My great grandfather was an alcoholic and murderer who was sent to prison for life. My grandfather followed in his footsteps with heavy drinking and constant fighting. We had never been inside the doors of a church.

One day, a man in our neighborhood felt burdened for our family. He came and invited us to church. My grandfather cursed him out and told him to leave. But he wouldn't give up. He kept coming back and asking us to come. Finally my grandmother and my father went to church with him. My father sat in church as a 9-year-old boy for the first time. He heard that Jesus loved him and could make a difference in our family.

Soon my grandmother became a follower of Christ as well as my father. After several years of praying, my grandfather also became a follower of Christ and his life was changed. He became a church deacon for over 33 years until he passed away. There are now three pastors in our family as a result of God's impacting grace.

You are surrounded by families just like ours. Families looking for answers, families torn apart that need healing, families that desperately need to experience God's grace. Let's be committed to understanding postmodern families—reaching postmodern families, discipling postmodern families, and partnering with postmodern families.





# The Future of Children's Ministry

Dale Hudson

From: *The Future of Children's Ministry*

A KidMin360 Collaborative Children's Ministry Resource

Created by Greg Baird, KidMin360 (<http://kidmin360.com>)

## 1. The future of children's ministry will be tied to the future of "pop" (popular) culture.

That statement may make your temperature rise a little...but it's the truth. Many of our current practices are direct reflections of the culture in which we live.

Someone asked the president of MTV how they keep up with the culture. His response, "We create the culture." Take a look at your music, imagery, teaching methods, and communication. If it's being successful. . . it's probably synced up with the current pop culture.

I know what some of you are thinking...we must stand against the culture if we're going to change the world. Let me ask you a question. How is it going? Pretty simple answer. . . not too well. You know why? It's going to have to be an inside job.

If we are going to influence the culture and change the world, we must pray God will open doors for children who love Him to become actors, singers, sports stars, writers, and producers. An example is Bailee Madison who is a rising child star in Hollywood. She's not only a star...she's a shining light for Jesus.

I have a close friend who is a producer for Disney and Universal. He trains and places children in key film, television, and musical roles. He is making a spiritual investment in the children who will influence the future.

One of the kids that was in my children's ministry years ago now plays in the NFL. He now has a huge platform to share His faith. We must make these type investments and ask God to raise these children up into roles where they can truly influence the culture from the inside out.

## 2. The future of children's ministry will become increasingly diverse ethnically and culturally.

Most of the population growth in the U.S. will come from immigrants already in the U.S. or those who will migrate to the U.S. No majority ethnicities will exist by 2050 in the United States. Children's ministries will reflect the wonderful diversity of the body of Christ.

## 3. The future of children's ministry will reside more and more in urban areas.

By 2050, 90 percent of Americans will live in urban areas. We must invest our time and energies where the majority of children will be living.

## 4. The future of children's ministry will be multi-site.

The multi-site church revolution continues to grow rapidly. . . taking children's ministry right along with it.

**5. The future of children’s ministry will show sporadic attendance patterns**

As I talk with churches across the country, the norm is for families to attend church once every two or even three weeks. As the pace of life continues to race ahead, families will continue to make time choices.

**6. The future of children’s ministry will see continued emphasis on family ministry.**

Family ministry will not only be focused on partnering with parents to disciple their children, but also discipling parents as part of the process. We will have the opportunity to disciple parents who have very little Bible knowledge or Bible background. They will learn together with their children that Noah’s Ark isn’t just about the movie “Evan Almighty.”

**7. The future of children’s ministry will involve online children’s ministries.**

As churches continue to expand their online worship services and discipleship tools, they will develop these same online opportunities for children as well.

**8. The future of children’s ministry will see us moving from the printed Word to the digital Word.**

Just look at the numbers. In 2009 there were about two billion physical books sold in the United States. Sounds like a lot, but that’s down nearly five percent from 2008. This year that number is expected to drop another two percent. But e-books? Sales will go from about \$150 million last year to an estimated billion-dollar business by 2012, as new products from tech companies like Apple flood the market. Kids will bring their Bible to church, but it will be in a digital format. The Bible is just as much God’s Word on an iPhone as it is on a printed page.

**9. The future of children’s ministry will move toward mobile work.**

Children’s Pastors and Directors will be given much more flexibility to get out of the office and work from home or even on the go because of the rapid expansion of mobile work technology. You will see less and less desktop computers and more and more mobile work devices such as laptops and iPads.

**10. The future of children’s ministry will move from passive learning to active learning.**

The days of one-way information download will give way to collaborative, hands on, interactive learning. Children’s ministries will realize that children who play interactive video games, learn at school by using new interfacing technology, and help determine outcomes through texting, learn best by participation instead of passivity

**11. The future of children’s ministry will be ministering to a wide variety of family units.**

Single parents, blended families, and grandparents raising their grandchildren will continue to rise. Ministering to children whose parents are living together unmarried will also continue to increase.

**12. The future of children’s ministry will be affected by the next big issue that churches must face.**

The issue used to be divorce, but now it is whether or not homosexuality is an approved lifestyle for a Christ Follower. The decisions that parents, pastors, and church leaders make about this will affect the beliefs of children in the future.

**13. The future of children’s ministry will be an increasing culture of pluralism.**

Churches will have to intentionally teach children that Jesus is the only way to God and eternal life. But they must also be taught to be respectful to others as they stand for the truth. They must be taught to speak the truth in love.

**14. The future of children’s ministry will involve connecting with, communicating with, and training volunteers through technology.**

Online training, YouTube and Vimeo videos, Twitter, Skype, and Facebook are just the beginning of tech tools that will be used to accomplish this. These tools will replace much of the “come to church and sit in a room” style training. As technology continues to rapidly progress, so will the ability to use it for these purposes.

**15. The future of children’s ministry will involve more variety in teaching.**

Media saturated children will push back against the flood of video curriculum that

they are being exposed to week after week. Video elements will still be used, but entire lessons taught by video will be replaced more often by a live teacher.

**16. The future of children’s ministry will be anchored in relationships if it is going to thrive.**

Kid-friendly buildings, cool music, and funny videos will not keep kids coming. Relationships will continue to be the key. Every child wants to be known individually and cared for by a caring leader. The children’s ministries that make an impact will keep relational connections at the top of their priority list.

Our ministry canoe is not resting in a stagnant pond. Instead it is being carried down an every-changing river. The future is just around the river bend.

We must ask God to give us the wisdom, insight, and courage to make changes—very quick changes at times—to successfully navigate the future of children’s ministry.

**“The Future of Children’s Ministry” from KidMin360**  
Download a free copy from <http://kidmin360.com>





## Children’s Faith Formation at Church & Home: Birth to Age 5

Jolene Roehlkepartain

**T**oo often we focus our children’s faith formation solely within the church since that’s where we have the most control and impact. We can offer a welcoming, warm nursery. We can provide religious classes for young children. We can organize family ministry projects and programs for families with young children.

Yet, we’re missing most of our influence on children’s faith formation when we focus our efforts only within the church. It’s when we create a faith formation strategy for children that includes what happens in the church and in the home that we have the most impact in the short term and the long term.

The Search Institute studied what is most likely to predict the faith maturity of a young person by surveying more than 11,000 individuals in 561 randomly chosen congregations. Search Institute researchers identified two strong factors that predicted the faith maturity of young people: family religiousness and Christian education involvement (Search Institute, 39).

---

**Jolene Roehlkepartain** is a writer and speaker on family, children and teenagers, and spirituality. She is also the founder and president of Ideas to Ink, LLC, an innovative company based in Minnesota that focuses on the areas of parenting, children’s issues, youth development, spirituality, and education. Jolene has written 31 books, including *Raising Healthy Children Day by Day*, *Parenting Preschoolers with a Purpose*, *101 Great Games for Kids*, *Teaching Kids to Care and Share*, and *Taking It Personally*. She has also coauthored 10 books, including *Doing Good Together* and *What Young Children Need to Succeed*. Her books have been translated into a number of languages, including Chinese, Hindi, Bahasa Indonesia, Polish, and Korean, and are sold internationally. She has previously been featured in broadcasts and publications including National Public Radio, The Washington Post, Time, Psychology Today, KARE 11 (the NBC affiliate based in Minneapolis), Glamour, and Woman’s Day.

Too often, we assume that we have no influence over family religiousness. We're grateful to see the religious families that we have, and too often, we wish we had more of these families. Yet, we can help all families deepen their faith, which benefits not only the children but every family member as well.

## Encouraging Family Religiousness

What does it mean for a family to be religious? Researchers identified three key factors: talking to family members about faith or God, having family devotions, and doing family projects to help others (Search Institute, 46). The Vibrant Faith at Home website expanded this list even further, providing easy-to-do, faith-formation activities for families with young children in six areas (go to the website at: <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org>):

- ◆ Caring conversations
- ◆ Ritual and tradition
- ◆ Prayer
- ◆ Bible story
- ◆ Serving others
- ◆ Learning about faith

Families that are religious are comfortable doing these types of activities. Families that are not religious (which often can be a large group of families) are not. So the key is to make it easy for all families to do religious activities that don't stretch them too far out of their comfort zone.

Parents often bring their young children to church with the goal that the church will do all the faith formation work for their children. "Church school is considered to be the primary context for children, youth, and adults to learn the content of the faith tradition and to make connections between content and living the life of a Christian in the world," writes Elizabeth Caldwell (327). One of the barriers we need to overcome in children's faith formation is the idea that this formation

happens only at church. In children's ministry, we can help parents see that they have a lot to offer and that they don't need to be "faith experts" to do so.

### 1. Helping Families to Talk about Faith

Which family member tends to be most comfortable talking about faith? Mom (Search Institute, 46). We need to help all the adults become more at ease with talking about faith issues. That includes not only Dad but also other adult relatives in the family. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other extended family members can have a big impact on a child's faith formation.

Too often parents think they don't have the knowledge or resources to talk about faith, especially when they compare themselves to church leaders and clergy. We need to keep reiterating over and over how church leaders are resources and guides. Adult family members are the ones who make the most impact on a child's faith formation.

"By the way they hold and handle the child, by the guidance, permissions and prohibitions they give, they convey to the child a deep, almost bodily conviction that there is meaning to what they are doing," writes James W. Fowler in *Stages of Faith*. "The child, feeling cherished and included in the parent's meanings, feels an inner sense of trust-worthiness and reliability that can balance the terrors of separation and abandonment" (55).

These everyday interactions and everyday conversations are what help a child grow up well, not only psychologically but spiritually as well. When parents see that the church has influence over their child only a few hours a week compared to parents who are with their children multiple hours each day, parents can begin to realize that they do have a lot to offer.

The trick, however, is to convince parents that they can start talking about faith in easy, comfortable ways. Consider downloading a caring conversation activity from Vibrant Faith at Home once a month to distribute to parents

(<http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org>). Select Caring Conversation in the library and choose activities under the “Young Family” category or have families come to church to try one of the caring conversations when you’re all together and give them another one to take home. Giving parents the opportunity to practice and succeed will often encourage them to keep talking about faith at home.

## 2. Getting Families to Help Others

Families often feel the most comfortable doing small, short-term, family service projects. Most families feel at ease talking about helping others and why it’s important to do so. A number of churches have monthly family service projects where families can come to church and participate in ways that help others.

Finding projects that are easy and can still have an impact often can be a challenge. Resources such as *Doing Good Together* (Friedman & Roehlkepartain, 51-52, 56) and *Teaching Kids to Care & Share* (Roehlkepartain, 20-21) are packed with lots of easy-to-do service projects that families can do together. The resource, *Doing Good Together*, also includes an entire chapter with projects that families can do on their own.

Vibrant Faith at Home also has free family service projects that you can download to use in your children’s ministry and/or giving to families for them to do at home. Go to the Service activities in the library at <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org>. Choose activities under the “Young Family” category.

## 3. Encourage Families to Do Religious Rituals

Some families already do religious rituals. The most common are mealtime prayers. Some also do bedtime prayers. Religious holidays such as Advent, Christmas, and Easter also often have religious rituals that families have adopted from previous generations.

Create ways for families to identify the religious rituals they do and to continue them. Often parents don’t realize that putting out a nativity crèche or Advent candles are important religious rituals. You can provide ways for families to talk about these religious rituals by creating a short talk sheet for them to use at home.

Vibrant Faith at Home also has religious rituals that you can download to give to families to do at home. Go to the Ritual and Tradition section in the library and choose activities under the “Young Family” category. Explore activities under other age groups to see if any can be used or adapted for other aspects of your ministry.

## 4. Getting Families to Go Deeper

Other important faith practices that families can do at home include prayer, activities to learn about faith, and Bible stories or Bible study. These, however, tend to intimidate families that are new or uncomfortable about faith issues. Think of these practices as ones to help your religious families to go deeper and to get your newer families (eventually) to go deeper into faith formation.

Vibrant Faith at Home has individual, easy-to-do activities in three of these areas: prayer, learning about faith, and Bible stories. Go to <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org> and look in the Library for activities under these categories: prayer, learning about faith, and Bible stories.

## Going Deeper with Your Children’s Ministry

You won’t have much of an impact on families at home, however, if they’re not coming to church. That’s why it’s essential to focus on both aspects of Search Institute’s finding on the two strong factors that impact faith maturity of young people: Christian education involvement and family religiousness (Search Institute, 39).

How do you get families to come to your Christian education activities? By doing Christian education in a way that matters to them. Researchers identified seven key factors of what makes a Christian education program for young people effective ((Search Institute, 56): Teachers, Pastor, Educational Process, Educational Content, Peer Involvement, Parent Involvement, and Goals.

An effective children's ministry program has teachers that are high in a mature faith, care about children, and know education theory and methods (Search Institute, 56). Unfortunately, churches tend to have teachers that have these characteristics working with adults, not children. In fact, researchers found that 55 percent of adult education teachers in churches have a high-faith maturity compared with 40 percent of teachers who work with teenagers and only 32 percent of those who work with children (Search Institute, 57).

Have your teachers take the faith formation maturity scale at <http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/exploringfaithmaturity-adults.pdf>. See how they did. Which aspects of faith are they strongest in? Which need more formation?

Effective children's ministries also have a pastor who is highly committed to the program, devotes significant hours to the program, and also knows education theory and practice that's effective with children (Search Institute, 56). How much is your pastor involved in your children's ministry?

Educational process and education content include areas such as emphasizing intergenerational contact, creating a sense of community, involving children in service projects, effective teaching the Bible and core theological concepts and more (Search Institute, 56).

You also want to create your children's ministry in a way so that children can spend time together more (Search Institute, 56). Parents flee churches when their child is the only one (or one of two) in a class. Some churches have grouped different age groups together to create ways for children to interact

with each other. This can be difficult when you're working with young children since infants and 5 year olds are very different, but churches have found ways for children of different age groups to be together and get to know each other.

The last two categories are ones that children's ministries often overlook and don't realize how critical they are. This includes parent involvement and goals more (Search Institute, 56). Parents not only need ways to connect with each other, but it's critical for them to be involved in program decisions and planning. The final category is goals. Does your children's ministry have a clear mission statement? Does it have clear learning objectives?

## Emphasizing the Link between Church and Home

As you plan your program and evaluate it, continue to look at the connections between church and home. The more you can build ways for families to talk about faith issues (and act on them) at home and the more you can strengthen your children's ministry at church, the more impact you'll have on families.

"Christian education matters much more than we expected," concluded the researchers who examined Christian education in churches. "Done well, it has the potential beyond any other congregational influence to deepen faith and commitment" (Search Institute, 2).

Whether we're playing with infants in the nursery, singing songs with toddlers, pretending we're running across the Red Sea to escape the Egyptians, or doing a family service project together at church, all of it matters. The way we interact with children, their parents, and their older siblings gives them a sense of whether or not they want to come back for more.

## Work Cited

- Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981.
- Caldwell, Elizabeth F. "At Home with Faith and Family: A Protestant Christian Perspective," in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality* edited by Karen Marie Yust, Aostre N. Johnson; Sandy Eisenberg Sasso; and Eugene Roehlkepartain. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.
- Friedman, Jenny; and Roehlkepartain, Jolene. *Doing Good Together: 101 Easy, Meaningful Service Projects for Families, School, and*

- Communities*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 2010.
- Roehlkepartain, Jolene. *Teaching Kids to Care & Share: 300+ Mission & Service Ideas for Children*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.
- Search Institute. *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations*. Minneapolis, Search Institute, 1990.
- Vibrant Faith at Home. Faith Formation Activities for Families with Young Children.  
[www.vibrantfaithathome.org/library/library-listed-by-audience/library-audience-young-family](http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org/library/library-listed-by-audience/library-audience-young-family).





## Children’s Faith Formation at Church & Home: Birth to Age 5

Jolene Roehlkepartain

It’s easy to focus all of our efforts for children’s faith formation into what happens at church: Christian education for children, children’s church, and other church programs for children. Yet, faith formation happens every day—no matter where children are. We can help children (and their families) grow deeper in their faith whether they’re at church, at home, or somewhere else. In fact, the more we emphasize how faith formation makes up each person’s every day experience, the more children and adults will grow spiritually.

Minneapolis-based Search Institute conducted a landmark study on what is most likely to predict the faith maturity of a person, whether that person is a child, a teenager, or an adult. By surveying more than 11,000 individuals in 561 randomly chosen congregations (Search Institute, 2), Search Institute researchers found two strong factors that predicted the faith maturity of children: 1. Family religiousness and 2. Christian education involvement (Search Institute, 39).

Family religiousness happens no matter where families are. When we focus our efforts on helping families talk about faith and act on their faith, we can build a strong faith formation for children (and their families) while helping them to discover new aspects of faith.

---

**Jolene Roehlkepartain** is a writer and speaker on family, children and teenagers, and spirituality. She is also the founder and president of Ideas to Ink, LLC, an innovative company based in Minnesota that focuses on the areas of parenting, children’s issues, youth development, spirituality, and education. Jolene has written 31 books, including *Raising Healthy Children Day by Day*, *Parenting Preschoolers with a Purpose*, *101 Great Games for Kids*, *Teaching Kids to Care and Share*, and *Taking It Personally*. She has also coauthored 10 books, including *Doing Good Together* and *What Young Children Need to Succeed*. She has previously been featured in broadcasts and publications including National Public Radio, The Washington Post, Time, Psychology Today, KARE 11 TV, Glamour, and Woman’s Day.

## Encouraging Faith Practices at Home

How can a family be religious in ways they find attractive? Researchers identified three key factors:

1. Talking to family members about faith or God
2. Having family devotions, and
3. Doing family projects to help others (Search Institute, 46).

Unfortunately, too many families don't feel confident in doing faith practices at home. They think they're not the experts and that faith formation can happen only at church. Part of our job is to show families that they're already doing faith formation at home (and not calling it that) and that they can easily do more.

How are families already doing faith formation? Some families have mealtime and bedtime prayers. Other families answer children's questions about God. Others have religious rituals that have been passed down through the generations, such as going to worship services, lighting Advent candles, reading scripture, helping others in need, and so on.

Distribute the "Emphasizing Faith at Home" worksheet (at the end of the article) to families to help them identify what they're already doing in this area. This worksheet also can help families find other ways to build faith at home.

*Vibrant Faith at Home* provides free, easy-to-do, faith-formation activities for families with children. Some churches download a different activity each week (or once a month) and distributes an activity to each family to do at home. This makes it easy for families to talk about faith and act on their values at home. Vibrant Faith at Home's activities cover six areas:

1. Caring conversations
  2. Ritual and tradition
  3. Prayer
  4. Bible story
  5. Serving others
  6. Learning about faith
- <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org/library/library-listed-by-audience/library-audience-young-family>

Even when we provide activities, it's important to continue to address the issue that many parents feel uneasy or uncomfortable with their role in helping their children develop spiritually. "We find that many parents within the church fail to speak with their children about moral and spiritual matters and are neglecting to integrate practices into their everyday lives that nurture faith," writes Marcia Bunge, a professor of religion at Gustavus Adolphus College (Bunge, 54). Some churches develop not only children's education courses but also ways for parents to talk about pertinent issues with a children's minister or another member of the clergy. Parents often have good intentions, but many are busy, stressed, and unsure of their role as a "faith educator." The more we can get to know parents and listen to them, the more we can help them create ways to integrate faith more into their everyday home life.

## Linking Church to Home

Part of what makes parents uncomfortable about faith formation at home is that they see it as an "another project" and something else to do. Instead, build on what you're doing at church and create links that extend what you're doing at church to what parents can do at home.

For example, what are you doing with the children during Christian education? Could you provide a couple of questions that parents could ask their children about what happened during Christian education as talking points during their next meal together?

Church holy days also create an ideal way to create connections between church and home. What one small thing could families do during each of the four Sundays of Advent? Create easy ways for families to mark Ash Wednesday, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and other holy days not only at church but also at home. For example, Vibrant Faith offers free activities that link many of the church holy days for families to do at home. Go to “young family” at <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org/library/library-by-category-col-150/library-category-ritual-and-tradition>.

## Exploring Children’s Questions

For many families, encouraging them to pay attention to the questions that their children ask can open up all kinds of opportunities for faith formation. “Children can be natural philosophers. Much to our amazement, they often ponder big questions. They ask about life and meaning, knowing and knowledge, truth and justice, reality and death,” writes Tobin Hart, psychology professor at the State University of West Georgia. “For many, the spiritual quest is focused and explored through pondering, puzzling over, and playing with such questions” (Hart, 168).

Yet, too often, parents shut these questions down instead of seeing them as invitations to connect more with their children and with faith.

Part of the struggle is that children ask these questions when parents are busy doing something else. Another problem is that parents often don’t know how to respond.

That’s where the church can come in. Some churches have taken on these questions, in fact, encouraged parents and children to ask them and bring them to church. That way parents don’t need to feel pressured to provide the “correct answer” and churches can help families “play” with questions and go deeper into faith issues.

## Getting to Know Families

Nothing will have a greater impact on the link between church and home than taking the time to get to know families. Not just by name. But by finding out who they are, what they love to do, and what they’re struggling with.

“Meaningful conversations are an essential part of a significant relationship,” writes researcher Peter Scales (Scales, 122). Too often we provide activities that grow out of “what we want children and families to learn” rather than also taking into account “who children and families are and what they’re interested in.” Both are critical to not only a successful children’s ministry but also a successful ministry that links faith formation between church and home.

One church discovered that parents were struggling with how to deal with sexuality questions (and the sexual content their kids were stumbling into on the Internet) with their 10 to 12 year old kids. The children’s minister jumped on this issue, creating a one-time class for parents, while the children focused on another issue. The parents asked lots of questions and raised many concerns. The children’s minister asked if the parents wanted a sexuality expert speak to them, and the parents said yes. During that session, parents began whispering to each other. There was a lot of information about sexuality that was new to them. Learning this information within the church gave them more confidence in dealing with these issues when their families were away from church.

Other churches have discovered that families often feel disconnected from their extended families. Many wish grandparents were still alive, healthier, or lived closer. One church linked elderly people with families in their church so they could have “adoptive grandparents.” While some of the relationships didn’t click, many of them did, bringing people together who typically wouldn’t connect.

## Noticing When Families Pull Away

Being intentional about creating ways to do faith formation at church and home won't be effective unless you're paying attention to how engaged families are in your church. What happens when a family starts pulling away? Do you wait and see what happens? Or do you ask—before a family has the chance to drift away?

Most ministers don't like conflict, and most assume that when a family starts to pull away that conflict is the reason. Yet, families slip away from a church for many reasons, and if you're willing to stay connected with them, you can learn a lot by simply asking in a non-threatening way.

"I haven't seen your family at church lately. I miss you." Often a couple of statements like that encourage a family to talk. If they don't want to discuss it, they'll usually dodge the question and change the topic. A family that's pulling away will feel less alone when you ask.

A family's church involvement is much more than about church. It's about what's happening in their family. Maybe someone lost his or her job. Or someone got sick. Or one of the children joined a sport's team that practices during worship. If you already have a relationship with a family, a family will more likely be honest with you about what's going on.

A lot of emphasis in churches these days is placed on church growth. What can get lost during church-growth strategies is keeping tabs on who already comes through your church doors. It's easier to keep a family than to lose one and attract a new one. While it's important to continue attracting new people, it's just as essential to work to keep the families you have engaged and coming.

## Being Relevant in People's Lives

As you link home life with church life for families with children, keep being relevant in people's lives. Continue to follow their interests, their struggles, and make faith formation applicable to their lives. Researchers found these five indicators that described adults who had a mature faith:

1. I go out of my way to show love to people I meet—53%
2. I take time for periods of prayer and meditation—50%
3. I try to apply my faith to political and social issues—50%
4. I talk with other people about my faith—47%
5. I seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually—45%  
(Search Institute, 11).

An effective children's ministry program pays attention to what's happening not only in children's lives but also the lives of their parents. Many families, for example, struggle with how much time children want to play video games, watch TV, and surf the Internet (all activities that get lumped into a phenomenon that researchers call "screen time"). Some parents feel they're fighting a losing battle and that the church doesn't have much to offer with this issue.

Yet, children's ministers who keep relevant find effective ways to do so. For example, one children's minister found someone in the church who enjoyed reading research studies. That volunteer discovered a study that was pertinent to parents struggling with screen time. The Learning Habit Study of 46,000 homes revealed that families who spend more time doing family activities (such as attending religious worship services together, playing board games, and having family dinners) had kids who spent less time in front of screens, did better in school, were more focused, and

had better social and emotional coping skills (Dobner).

The key is to continue to find ways to link church and home so that children and their parents can see that faith formation impacts every aspect of their lives, whether they're playing soccer, eating dinner, walking the dog, playing with a friend, or going to church. Faith permeates everything. Our role is to help children and their families see that—and live that.

### Work Cited

- Bunge, Marcia J., "The Dignity and Complexity of Children: Constructing Christian Theologies of Childhood." *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*. Edited by Karen Marie Yust, Aostre N. Johnson, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, and Eugene Roehlkepartain. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006..
- Dobner, Jennifer. "Family, Screen Time Tied to Kids' Success: Study." *WebMD Health News*, September 1, 2014.

Hart, Tobin, "Spiritual Experiences and Capacities of Children and Youth." *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*. Edited by Eugene Roehlkepartain, Pamela Ebstyn King, Linda Wagener, and Peter L. Benson. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006.

Scales, Peter C. *Other People's Kids: Social Expectations and American Adults' Involvement with Children and Adolescents*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2003.

The Search Institute. *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations*. Minneapolis, Search Institute, 1990.

*Vibrant Faith at Home*, Faith Formation Activities for Families with Young Children,

<http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org/library/library-listed-by-audience/library-audience-young-family>

# Emphasizing Faith at Home

---

*It's easy to talk about faith at home—and to act on what you value most. Look at the checklist below. Checkmark which practices you do. Star ones you could try.*

## Prayer

- \_\_\_\_\_ Mealtime prayer
- \_\_\_\_\_ Bedtime prayer
- \_\_\_\_\_ Morning prayer
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prayers for people in the news
- \_\_\_\_\_ Thankful prayers

## Talk about Faith

- \_\_\_\_\_ Talk about what you value and why
- \_\_\_\_\_ Discuss your family's history of faith and church
- \_\_\_\_\_ Name what you're thankful for and why
- \_\_\_\_\_ Talk about which people have made a difference in your faith journey
- \_\_\_\_\_ Identify which social justice issues you advocate for and why
- \_\_\_\_\_ Discuss when you've had doubts and why
- \_\_\_\_\_ Talk about how you feel about church today
- \_\_\_\_\_ Discuss why you think faith is important

## Family Devotions

- \_\_\_\_\_ Read the Bible together
- \_\_\_\_\_ Talk about a Bible story together
- \_\_\_\_\_ Memorize scripture
- \_\_\_\_\_ Talk about how your faith impacts how you interpret what's going on in the world
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sing a favorite faith song or hymn together
- \_\_\_\_\_ Read a popular book with faith theme, such as children's books listed at Spirituality & Practice, <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/features.php?id=25197#childrens>

## Family Projects to Help Others

- \_\_\_\_\_ Bake (or buy) something to give to someone who is sick or homebound
- \_\_\_\_\_ Draw pictures to send to grandparents or someone else
- \_\_\_\_\_ Visit someone who is lonely or sick
- \_\_\_\_\_ Help someone who needs a hand, such as raking leaves or shoveling snow
- \_\_\_\_\_ Collect food for a food bank or food shelf



## Starting Afresh with Children and Families

Craig Mitchell

“**W**ho would like to make a video of today’s story?” Hands leap up around the group. About thirty children and adults are seated on cushions and chairs in the church foyer. “We have four activities today—video making, craft, an interactive game, and a prayer station. You have 40 minutes. You can choose which activities to join in during that time.”

**Alive@5** is a monthly gathering for families with elementary school and younger children, mixing worship, learning and community time. It was birthed four years ago as an attempt to build a new future for our congregation in Adelaide, South Australia. In many ways it is still a fragile experiment in a new way of ‘being church’ together.

---

**Craig Mitchell** is a volunteer leader in children, youth and family ministry at Rosefield Church. He is the coordinator of a number of groups and programs including Alive@5 (described here), Interactive Easter and Interactive Christmas, an annual Church Camp and annual biblical Teaching Weekend. Craig is a member and former Chair of the Church Council. He is also the National Director for Formation, Education and Discipleship for the Uniting Church in Australia. Craig is an adjunct faculty member of the Dept. of Theology, Flinders University, and a doctoral student in the area of Christian education. He lives in the Adelaide Hills, South Australia

## Addressing the Decline

Rosefield Uniting Church has been a medium-sized church by Australian standards. A decade ago there were 250 people attending worship and about 50 children and young people actively connected with the worship and Christian education programs. Today there are half that number in worship and just a handful of children and youth. This is the story of many, many churches in Australia and the US—a slow but steady decline, with an ageing congregation wanting the young families to return and ensure the future of the church. It is a familiar tale.

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) was formed in 1977 from the union of the Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist Churches. A recent national census by NCLS indicated that the median size of worship attendance across all UCA congregations was 35 people, with 41% of these churches in rural towns of less than 2,000 people. Our churches have an average worship attendance of just 3 children across all congregations. 43% of them have no infant baptisms. (Powell et al) Clearly, something drastic is needed.

*Congregations of the old Protestant mainline denominations... continue to sponsor many educational activities, but they lack the intentionality, the coherence and the continuity needed to maintain and renew their identities as communities of faith. (Foster, 45)*

His critique is that there is no longer much coherence between what denominations do and what they hope for in the life of congregations. Churches go program shopping while denominations are consumed by issues of structural reform, financial and property woes, and ministry placements. The key word for me is “intentionality.” The keep challenge is to adapt.

Charles Foster sees three particular challenges for churches:

1. *Reclaiming a notion of learning conducive to forming faith in the education of congregations—in particular through the interdependence of developmental, practice, and discovery learning*
2. *Revitalizing congregations as catechetical cultures of faith formation and transformation—in particular through “the interplay of formal and informal social processes and practices that maintain and renew vision, values and practices through the generations.” (Foster, 9)*
3. *The cultivation of an ecclesially grounded educational imagination in congregations—this is an adaptive challenge based around events in the congregation’s life rather than a technical challenge of new curriculum or activities.*

## Fresh Steps in Mission

Just as the decline in attendance was becoming evident, Rosefield Uniting Church employed a part-time children’s worker whose role was to commence a daytime playgroup ministry to pre-school children and their parents. This was immediately successful and led to playgroups being run three mornings a week, plus a group for babies. Within two years, about 100 families were connected to the church through this ministry.

Yet only a couple of these families became connected with the Sunday morning worshipping congregation. Some brought their children for baptism, yet even they did not engage with the church community.

**Alive@5** was born as an attempt to bridge the gap, not as a stepping stone to Sunday morning, but as a place to belong for those who might never connect with a more formal, structured worship service. We began in 2011 with “Interactive Easter,” a public, all-age event on Palm Sunday evening, and the



following month started **Alive@5**, which runs from 5.00-7.00 pm once a month.

The **Alive@5** pattern is fairly constant:

1. Arrival activity (since people drift gradually)
2. Welcome and theme introduction
3. Song
4. Prayer of thanksgiving (usually participatory)
5. Scripture passage: usually participatory or using multimedia
6. Contemporary version of the Scripture passage: storybook, drama, puppets, video
7. Brief theme commentary
8. Activities: three to five activities (30-40 minutes)
9. Show and tell: sharing with others what we did and learned
10. Prayers for others: sometimes this is incorporated in the activities
11. Song
12. Blessing: writing a blessing each month to match the theme
13. Meal: church folks are rostered to provide a stand-up 'finger food' meal and people stand around and chat

The seating and mood are informal. We seek to blend Christian and vernacular language—to speak faith in everyday terms. We want to avoid anything that looks like a caricature of Sunday School (everyone cutting and pasting to make the same item). Encouraging parents and children to interact is key, although a constant challenge.

Our inspiration for **Alive@5** was “Messy Church”, an approach to starting a new faith community that has emerged from the UK and has become quite popular across Australia. We looked at and learned from Messy Church, but for both educational and theological reasons took a different approach. This included a more inductive and expressive approach to both listening to and responding to the Bible, hence the activities being a response to the

Word rather than an introduction to the theme or text.

## Themes

As we are writing our own program each month, we've been free to choose and develop our themes, short series such as:

- exploring the life of Jesus
- exploring parables
- exploring “big” characters in the Old Testament: Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Naomi
- exploring practices of faith: forgiveness, prayer, hospitality
- exploring life themes: friendship, family, pets, heroes, food
- exploring creativity: drama, music, play
- exploring faith themes: creation, faith as a journey, Pentecost

The “big characters” series linked people from the Hebrew Scriptures with recent animated movies, such as Queen Esther with “Brave” (Theme: Courage), King Solomon with “Frozen” (Theme: Finding Our Gifts), Joseph with “Up” (Theme: In Your Dreams), Jacob and Esau with “Monsters University” (Theme: Rivalry). We've centered themes around storybooks such as Dr. Seuss' “Oh, The Places You'll Go” and Maurice Sendak's “Where The Wild Things Are”.

**Alive@5** takes a narrative approach to Scripture. We try to find ways for people to experience and enter the story, not assuming that they are familiar with the details, yet allowing the sweep of the story to do its work. We selectively use videos of the life of Jesus to introduce the context of the story, and we're big fans of Sparkhouse's *Holy Moly* video series<sup>2</sup>.

## Activities

Each month, several activities take the place of a sermon or homily. Our hope is that across their range, the activities are multi-age, multi-

sensory multi-intelligence. We would rather give people opportunity to explore the narrative than tell them what it means. (The prior plenary theme conversation is the opportunity to open up the story.) This is probably the hardest part of the gathering to plan and succeed with. Activities include art, craft, drama, games, music, prayer, making videos, simulation activities, food, puppets, and anything else we can dream up.

We try to avoid giving people a particular craft to make, preferring instead to give them a range of materials, an idea (such as making a card for a friend) and letting them create their own response to the theme and Scripture.

Hands-on multimedia is a common activity. People have made movies with smartphones, composed music using a loop pedal, acted in “green screen” videos (with biblical scenery and a TV news desk setting added behind), made dance-beat songs and raps using keyboards and sampled sounds, taken photos of miniature Lego scenes to tell a story in tableau, and used mobile device apps to create ambient tunes as backing to a psalm of praise.

Generally, people can go to any activity in any order and spend as long as they wish at them. Occasionally we have run sequenced activities for the whole group (acting out “Where the Wild Things Are” together) or structured simulation activities (each group simultaneously preparing a meal for another group as an expression of hospitality). Most activities are facilitated while some are self-directed, such as the prayer stations.

We have learned to ensure that there is at least one activity suitable for children under four years of age. Involving parents and grandparents is a challenge, as many are inclined to stand back and watch the children, so we are constantly trying to design their participation.

When we gather back as a whole group after the activities, “Show and Tell” provides an opportunity for anyone to share something about what they did and what it meant for them. Each gathering closes with a simple blessing that we say together, reflecting the

theme, written in plain language, reminding us that God loves us and is always with us.<sup>3</sup>

## Interactive Easter and Christmas

Our “Interactive Events” started at Easter and Christmas in 2011 with the aim of engaging both the church and the wider community with the stories behind these key celebrations in the Christian year. Easter in Australia is a four-day holiday weekend when many families with children go away for a brief vacation. Christmas falls in the middle of a two-month long school break. So on Palm Sunday evening we explore the story of Easter from Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem to Easter Sunday. Three weeks before Christmas we invite people to encounter the narrative of Jesus’ coming and birth. Whether or not people come to worship on Easter Sunday or Christmas Day, they will have had an encounter with the story.

Like **Alive@5**, these “Interactive Events” involve music, drama, art, craft, stories, prayer, games and food. Otherwise they are quite different. The events are open from 5-7 pm. People can come and go when they wish. The sequence is like this.

1. *Arrival activity*: a simple craft activity in the church foyer
2. *Telling the Story*: a 12 to 15 minute presentation in the church, introducing the story of the event using music, video and drama
3. *Activities*: up to 15 activities throughout the church premises, allowing people to explore and respond to the Christmas or Easter story
4. *Final activity*: the last activity is either the Christmas stable or the empty tomb, a darkened room which expresses the culmination of the story.
5. *Food*: people exit to our church tennis courts where there is a BBQ and opportunity to relax and chat. At Easter time the BBQ is ‘fish fingers’ and bread as a reminder of Jesus’ resurrection appearance on the beach.

## Interactive Activities

While our activities are varied, we've developed something of a pattern that helps with planning. The pathway through the building follows loosely the events of the celebration—from Palm Sunday through to the Last Supper to the Cross to the Resurrection, from the Annunciation to Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem to the birth of Jesus.

Activities include self-expression on the theme through a range of art activities (painting on tiles, clay), some guided craft work (making palm crosses or angels or Easter butterflies), a computer with a range of short movie clips telling the story, activities such as "Christmas around the world" where people share their home traditions, making theme-related food (such as pretzels as an expression of Easter), and a story-reading tent. A few activities need special mention.

### The Last Supper

At Easter time we "black out" our crèche with black plastic and set a table for twelve with plates and cups, candles and Middle Eastern food - dried fruits, olives, pita bread, assorted dips, nuts, dukkah, grapes, bottles of grape juice and wine. A projector screens a loop from a Jesus movie showing the Last Supper scene. The dialogue is turned off. Ambient music is playing. People are invited into the space in groups. Any child must be accompanied by an adult (in pairs). On each plate is a printed parchment which welcomes people to the table and invites them to tell the story of this night to one another.

We allow people about 15 minutes at the table, but every time we have to almost forcibly eject them as they want to stay, eat and drink, reflect, and talk. It is a somber highlight of the event. Every 20 minutes we reset the table and welcome the next group.

### Prayer Stations

On some occasions we have set up a pilgrim's prayer walk through parts of the story—the

events of Holy Week or the events leading to Jesus' birth. Five or six stations are set in a candle-lit room. The stations feature classic and contemporary images, video loops, recorded music and sound effects (a rooster crowing), art installations (sand, pebbles and sandals to symbolize a journey) linking the story with contemporary experience, tactile prayers activities (such as magnetic poetry), and symbols to hold and take away (a palm cross, a nail, a coin). The reflections have been an amalgamation of the work of Cheryl Lawrie from Australia<sup>4</sup>, "Mucky Paws" by Roddy Hamilton from Scotland<sup>5</sup>, the Iona community<sup>6</sup>, and my own writing (see references at the end of the article), as well as various collected poems and prayers. We have also included display tables with Easter symbols or nativity scenes from around the world.

Any child entering the room must be accompanied by an adult. This is to invite conversational engagement with the stations across generations.

### The Stable and Empty Tomb

The final room is a stable or a tomb, in both cases an enclosure built with a steel frame and black cloth, carefully lit and arranged with simple. We narrate part of the story using poetry or prose. On occasion we've had Mary and Joseph with a very young baby in the manger. There has also been live, reflective music by the remarkable Leigh Newton.<sup>7</sup> People each receive a laminated blessing and symbol to take home—last Christmas this was a wooden cutout star with the word "Shine," our theme for the event. It is an effective, reflective culmination to the experience.

## Reflections on Our Experience

Drawing on the experience of churches in the United Kingdom, we're seeking to grow a "fresh expression" of church, not another group or program, but what might become a

new faith community.<sup>8</sup> The Church of England recently completed a ten-year longitudinal study of “fresh expressions” across ten diocese.<sup>9</sup> Across their study, about 25% of attendees were churchgoers, 35% were ‘de-churched’ and 40% were ‘non-churched’. “Fresh expressions” were led by teams of 3 to 12 people. The average size of each “fresh expression” was 43 participants.

**Alive@5** is attended by 20 to 40 people each month. It’s not a large gathering, yet half of those who attend have no other regular contact with the church. Our Interactive events attract 80 to 100 people; about half are people who don’t attend Sunday morning worship. Yet we are seeing the same faces and parents and grandparents bring children to these special occasions. While we would welcome a large influx of people, our limited success after four years mirrors the experience from the UK of fledgling faith communities.

Creating a monthly experience that mixes worship, learning, and genuine community is a significant challenge. It would be much easier to have a curriculum! We occasionally borrow ideas from resources such as *Spill the Beans*<sup>10</sup>, the United Church of Christ’s *Faith Practices*<sup>11</sup>, and Lifelong Faith’s *Living Well*<sup>12</sup>. Yet it is difficult to find activities that take the imagination and spiritual life of the child seriously, avoid shallow explanations of biblical texts, and don’t involve mass reproduction of a craft item. Added to this, we want to operate at the high end of technological learning. After four years, we have a bunch of local leaders and parents who “get” what we are trying to achieve, yet few of them are able to author the kinds of activities that fit our educational ethos.

However our biggest challenges in terms of evangelization are relational—building friendships across our playgroups and engaging pastorally with the families who connect with **Alive@5** and our Interactive events. Christian community is more than liturgy or learning, it is about living and becoming disciples together. At least we’re on a worthwhile journey towards this.

## Work Cited

Foster, Charles. *From Generation to Generation*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012.

## Website Links

- Many of our **Alive@5** and Interactive Christmas and Easter programs can be found here: [http://craigmitchell.typepad.com/mountain\\_masala/alive5](http://craigmitchell.typepad.com/mountain_masala/alive5) or go to the Worship Resources Links.
- See an album of our promotional images here: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/craigmitchell/sets/72157652116624745>
- Here are photos of **Alive@5** Interactive Christmas and Interactive Easter: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/craigmitchell/sets/72157649786509393>

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.messychurch.org.uk>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://wearesparkhouse.org/kids/holymoly/try/>
- <sup>3</sup> Download our **Alive@5** blessings here: [http://craigmitchell.typepad.com/mountain\\_masala/2013/05/blessings.html](http://craigmitchell.typepad.com/mountain_masala/2013/05/blessings.html)
- <sup>4</sup> <http://holdthisspace.org.au>
- <sup>5</sup> [http://abbotsford.typepad.com/abbotsford/mucky\\_paws](http://abbotsford.typepad.com/abbotsford/mucky_paws)
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.ionabooks.com/about-wild-goose-publications>
- <sup>7</sup> Go to <http://www.willowpublishing.com.au> and search on “Leigh Newton.”
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/essential>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/news/anglicanresearch>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://spillbeans.org.uk>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/faith-practices>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/living-well-chapters.html>



## Building Intergenerational Relationships between Children and Adults

Jolene Roehlkepartain

**Y**ou can transform your children’s ministry without additional funding, without recruiting more volunteers, and by instigating one small change: You can alter your children’s programs in a way that gets not only children and their parents talking—but everyone in your congregation.

What’s the change? Making your children’s ministry intergenerational.

---

**Jolene Roehlkepartain** is a writer and speaker on family, children and teenagers, and spirituality. She is also the founder and president of Ideas to Ink, LLC, an innovative company based in Minnesota that focuses on the areas of parenting, children’s issues, youth development, spirituality, and education. Jolene has written 31 books, including *Raising Healthy Children Day by Day*, *Parenting Preschoolers with a Purpose*, *101 Great Games for Kids*, *Teaching Kids to Care and Share*, and *Taking It Personally*. She has also coauthored 10 books, including *Doing Good Together* and *What Young Children Need to Succeed*. She has previously been featured in broadcasts and publications including National Public Radio, The Washington Post, Time, Psychology Today, KARE 11 TV, Glamour, and Woman’s Day.

We instigated this change in our congregation a number of years ago by doing only one thing: We created a program called Faith Partners

This easy-to-do program ran from our children's ministry, but it was a congregation-wide program. All that was required was that interested children, youth, and adults from the congregation sign up to be a faith partner.

We made the commitment short and easy: It was a three-month commitment to get to know another person from the congregation of a different generation. Some partners went out of their way to say "hello" to their partner whenever they were at church. Others sent birthday cards and invited a partner to go out for hot chocolate or ice cream. Others invested more time to develop long-term relationships. We encouraged partners to focus on giving the gift of themselves rather than giving store-bought gifts.

We let parents decide how old a participating child should be. Some parents signed up toddlers and preschoolers. Others signed up elementary-age children. A few parents even signed up their infants with the idea of their family getting to know another adult. We worked with the youth ministry to recruit teenagers, and we encouraged adults of all ages to sign up. The point? To get to know someone else in the congregation—and that it was easy. Everybody could do it.

The first year, about 25 children and 15 adults signed up. We then worked to recruit other adults to make the pairings even. We focused on some of the elderly attendees, especially the ones who felt a bit disconnected. Once adults learned that the program was about going out of their way to say hello and smile at a specific child, adults quickly signed up.

Within a few weeks, other parents, children, teenagers, and adults who hadn't signed up began asking how they could participate. They wanted to be part of something that they clearly saw had strong benefits. Relationships formed. People laughed more. People smiled more. We created more pairings, and the program grew.

When we created pairs, we always made sure someone in our group knew the adult and the child being paired. Ideally, you want to create pairings that will succeed and also protect both children and adults. If you don't know someone, it's important to find someone who does know the people you're pairing. You don't want to endanger anyone or pair a fragile person with a domineering personality.

The program changed the culture of our children's ministry—and the entire congregation. People started seeking out their partners and getting to know them. It gave them another purpose to come to church: to say hello and talk to their faith partners.

"A church program can't spiritually form a child, but a family living in an intergenerational community of faith can," writes Ivy Beckwith, a children's ministry consultant and speaker (Beckwith, 14).

## Taking an Intergenerational Approach

Too often, children's ministry becomes an age-segregated ministry. Depending on the number of children who attend our children's ministry, we group children by age: infants with infants, toddlers with toddlers, preschoolers with preschoolers, and so on. If we have small numbers of children, we still lump them together by age: young children with young children and older children with older children. It makes sense. Developmentally children of different ages have different needs and interests. But we lose something when we focus only on specific ages.

When children's ministry leaders focus *solely* on one age level—infant, toddler, preschool, early or later elementary—the spiritual nurture of children is limited. Children are best served when leaders chart an integrated path for the "developmental career" in all related ministry programs of the children from

birth through entering the young adult years (Issler, 65).

One of the most effective ways of charting an integrated path for children is by helping them form intergenerational relationships with other adults in the congregation. As children grow, they know other adults who they can turn to, they know other adults who cheer them on and care about them. In return, the children reciprocate. They create a community of caring toward the adults in your congregation as well.

## **Tapping the Benefits of Intergenerational Relationships**

Although an intergenerational approach to children's ministry can transform your children's ministry and your congregation, it also has many other benefits as well.

### **Bridging the generation gap**

Children's ministry is not the only ministry in the church that's heavily age segregated. So are most ministries. Adults work with adults. Teenagers meet with teenagers. Children hang out with children. Studies have found that when ministries take an intergenerational approach, the generation gap closes (Bales, Eklund, and Siffin, 677-689).

### **Promoting sharing and helping among children**

When children participate in intergenerational programs, researchers have found that children benefit by becoming more willing to share, help, and cooperate with elderly people (Dellmann-Jenkins, Lambert, and Fruit, 21-32). Compared to children who didn't get involved in an intergenerational program, these differences were significant (Dellmann-Jenkins, Lambert, and Fruit, 21-32).

### **Enhancing children's literacy**

Children make huge strides in language, literacy, and reading achievement when adults

read aloud to children through intergenerational programs (Bus and van IJzendoorn, 1-21). Adults who may be afraid of children often feel much more at ease if they're asked to come and read aloud books to children. That way adults don't have to think about discipline issues or changing diapers. Reading aloud is a great way for adults to connect with children in easy ways. Too often we rely only on our commitment volunteers and parents to read aloud to children. When we expand this to all adults in our congregation, everyone benefits.

### **Improving attitudes of children**

When children don't have much interaction with older adults, they get scared of them. Because so many children have grandparents who are either dead or who live far away, many children today don't get the opportunity to interact with older people. An intergenerational approach changes that. When children get to know older adults through an intergenerational event or program, they're more likely to think positively about older people and accept them more (Couper, Sheehan, and Thomas, 41-53 and Aday, Sims, McDuffie, and Evans, 143-151).

### **Cutting down on discipline issues**

Most children's ministers and volunteers dread disciplining children during children's events and programs. Discipline is difficult to do, and it's hard to find effective methods that work with all children. Intergenerational programs decrease discipline issues because children get to know other adults, and these relationships create a shared view of how children and adults act. Researchers have found that children's behavior significantly improves through intergenerational programs (Cummings, Williams, and Ellis, 91-107).

### **Encouraging children to ask for help**

A key developmental task for children to learn is how to recognize they need help and seek out help from trusted adults. Intergenerational relationships—when they're done well—

encourage children to do this. In fact, researchers found that children were more likely to seek out help from adults in their classroom when they've been involved in intergenerational events or programs (Dunham and Casadonte, 453-464).

### **Creating better social interactions for the elderly**

When an intergenerational program or event works well, not only do children benefit but so do the adults, especially the elderly.

Researchers found that after an intergenerational program with preschool children, elderly adults interacted socially more often with others and were less likely to isolate themselves (Short-DeGraff and Diamond, 467-482).

### **Recognizing the Barriers to Intergenerational Relationships**

If so many benefits exist, why do so many congregations resist creating intergenerational relationships? Because our society finds it easier to keep people segregated rather than integrated. Search Institute researchers found that only about eight percent of adults are engaged with young people outside of their families (Benson, 210).

"We need to make it the norm that all kids are *our* kids," Peter Benson, the former President of Search Institute writes. "We need to encourage that attitude in unrelated adults who do not feel that responsibility, and we need to find ways to invite and foster involvement by the adults who do feel that responsibility but have no natural connections to schools, youth organizations, or congregations in their daily lives" (Benson, 105-106).

We live in a society that believes that only parents nurture the lives of children (Benson 210). A lot of congregational children's ministries buy that as well, with the majority of children's ministry volunteers being parents of children.

With our age-segregated society and congregations, the truth is clear: Children are scared of adults and adults are scared of children. Each group has a lot of assumptions about each other that are not true. We tend to see people of other age groups as "problems to be fixed and threats to be avoided, not as potential friends, caring neighbors, and energetic contributors to community life," as Peter Benson writes (Benson, 211).

### **Setting Effective Intergenerational Ministry Goals**

How do you program well for inter-generational children's ministry? Setting effective goals is key. Researchers Roy Ballantyne, John Fien, and Jan Packer identified a number of effective goals.

#### **Expanding knowledge**

In children's ministry we often want children to learn something. The true is for your intergenerational component. What's key, however, is that activities need to be interesting and fun. You want people to engage and initiate conversations with each other. "Simply enjoying a program or experiences is not enough," they say (Ballantyne, Fien, and Packer, 13).

#### **Using experiential activities**

Hands-on activities deepens the experience for both children and adults (Ballantyne, Fien, and Packer, 14). You don't want people to sit and listen. You want them to move, experience, and interact in meaningful ways.

#### **Building skills**

Ideally, you want to create an inter-generational experience that builds skills, whether those skills are conversational skills, listening skills, or a hands-on skill, such as using a hammer to make a birdhouse (Ballantyne, Fien, and Packer, 14).



## **Learning problem-solving approaches**

Children, like adults, can get overwhelmed with problems. Addressing issues that both children and adults care about (such as recycling or cleaning up a dirty area in your church yard) can help both children and adults feel like they're making a difference and are empowered to solve problems (Ballantyne, Fien, and Packer, 14).

## **Changing behaviors**

How can your program or event encourage participants to change their behavior, even in the smallest ways? Maybe it's getting them to read more, to pick up an extra can of soup to give to the community food shelf, or to notice each other and say hello. "Overall, 82 percent of parents reported observing some degree of change in their children," researchers Ballantyne, Fien, and Packer found with effective intergenerational programs (Ballantyne, Fien, and Packer, 14).

## **Building relationships**

The most important, goal, however, is creating easy ways for adults and children to connect and build relationships. In our Faith Partners program, we provided conversation starters in the church bulletin and church newsletter to help partners connect and talk more deeply. "The goal is for each and every young person to experience many points of formal and informal relational support every days," Benson writes. "Even seemingly small gestures—calling children by name, acknowledging their presence, exchanging greetings, smiling when passing a young person on the street or in a hall—are important molecules of support that, accumulated over time, create a critical mass of positive nurture" (Benson, 105).

## **Encouraging relationships beyond your group**

Building relationships between children and adults is only the first step. The next step is to encourage people to continue deepening their relationships, particularly after your activity or

event is over. Researchers have found that even more benefits (such as better attitudes toward people of other ages) when children and adults had intergenerational contact outside the group (Wenzel and Rensen, 523-540).

## **Transforming Your Ministry with Intergenerational Relationships**

Through our Faith Partners program, we discovered that children got to meet and get to know more adults than if we hadn't started the program. The same was true for adults as well.

Our Faith Partners program gave people the opportunity to meet others in easy, non-threatening ways. Relationships formed and deepened. People began to reach out to each other even outside of the program because we created an intergenerational culture that permeated every aspect of our congregation (okay, maybe not the meeting of the trustees). But even with people who strongly clung to their comfortable groups, we saw an opening. Children have a way of breaking down barriers between people, especially adults.

It's time to start transforming our children's ministries so that they're more than offering programs for children. They're about enriching the spiritual lives of children and the adults in your congregation. After a few years of doing Faith Partners, we found that recruiting volunteers became easier because more adults had relationships with the children and wanted to spend time with them. As children grew older, they wanted to keep coming to church (instead of disengaging) because not only did they have friends who were their age, they also had adults they enjoyed seeing. Focusing on the strengths of intergenerational community, we discovered more strengths of everyone in the congregation, from the youngest to the oldest.

## Works Cited

- Aday, Ronald H.; Sims, Cyndee Rice; McDuffie, Wini; and Evans, Emilie. "Changing Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly: The Longitudinal Effects of an Intergenerational Partners Program." *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, Volume 10, Number 2, 1996, 143-151.
- Bales, Stephanie S.; Eklund, Susan J.; and Siffin, Catherine F. "Children's Perspectives of Elders Before and After a School-Based Intergenerational Program." *Educational Gerontology*, Volume 26, Number 7, 2000, 677-689.
- Ballantyne, Roy; Fien, John; and Packer, Jan. "Program Effectiveness in Facilitating Intergenerational Influence in Environmental Education: Lessons from the Field." *Journal of Environmental Education*, Volume 32, Number 4, Summer 2001, 8-15.
- Beckwith, Ivy. *Postmodern Children's Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2004.
- Benson, Peter L. *All Kids Are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents*. (Second Edition) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.
- Bus, Adriana G. and van IJzendoorn, Marinus H. "Joint Book Reading Makes for Success in Learning to Read: A Meta-Analysis on Intergenerational Transmission of Literacy." *Review of Educational Research*, Volume 65, Number 1, Spring 1995, 1-21.
- Couper, Donna P.; Sheehan, Nancy W.; and Thomas, Eugene L. "Attitude Toward Old People: The Impact of an Intergenerational Program." *Educational Gerontology*, Volume 17, Number 1, 1991, 41-53.
- Cummings, Sherry M.; Williams, Mona M.; and Ellis, Rodney A. "Impact of an Intergenerational Program on 4<sup>th</sup> Graders' Attitudes Toward Elders and School Behaviors." *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, Volume 6, Number 3, 2002, 91-107.
- Dellman-Jenkins, Mary; Lambert, Donna; and Fruit, Dorothy. "Fostering Preschoolers' Prosocial Behaviors Toward the Elderly: The Effect of an Intergenerational Program." *Educational Gerontology*, Volume 17, Number 1, 1991, 21-32.
- Dunham, Charlotte Chron and Casadonte, Dominick. "Children's Attitudes and Classroom Interaction in an Intergenerational Education Program." *Educational Gerontology*, Volume 35 Number 5, 2009, 453-464.
- Issler, Klaus. "Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Children's Spirituality" in Ratcliff, Donald, editor, *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004.
- Short-DeGraff, Margaret A. and Diamond, Karen. "Intergenerational Program Effects on Social Responses of Elderly Adult Day Care Members." *Educational Gerontology*, Volume 22, Number 5, 1996, 467-482.
- Wenzel, Martin Pinquart Silke and Rensen, Silvia Sö. "Changes in Attitudes among Children and Elderly Adults in Intergenerational Group Work." *Educational Gerontology*, Volume 26, Number 6, 2000, 523-540.