

Kevin Tankersley Photo



Where are the children?

Keeping sight of young disciples in the emerging church movement

David M. Csinos
ThM candidate, Union
Theological Seminary &
Presbyterian School of
Christian Education



Daniel L. Jennings
MTh candidate, Waterloo
Lutheran Seminary



Brian D. McLaren
Author of a dozen books,
including *A New Kind
of Christianity*



Karen Marie Yust
Associate Professor of
Christian Education, Union
Theological Seminary
& Presbyterian School of
Christian Education



When one of us (Dave) was a young adolescent, his family travelled from his home in Northern Ontario to Canada's Maritime provinces—a trip that involved a few days of driving in each direction. In order to help the hours in the car pass by, his family had borrowed a number of books-on-tape from the public library. One in particular stands out in his memory: Mary Higgins Clark's 1975 novel, *Where are the Children?* Energized for the family road trip and somewhat stir-crazy from being cooped up in a car for long hours, he and his family used to laugh and joke about the voice dramatization of the male narrator, which included impersonations of women and children. Although he remembers little of the story, he can still vividly hear the narrator, in the voice of a hysterical woman, yelling, "Where are the children? Where are the children?"

This humorous voice poses a haunting question we believe the growing movement of emerging churches should consider in regards to the spiritual formation of children. Although there is an increasing number of books, articles, magazines, blogs, and countless other resources about emerging faith communities, few mention the role of children in this movement or provide them with a voice. As a result, while adults and youth are being spiritually formed and transformed according to the values and theology of the emerging church, children within the same faith communities continue to receive instruction from curricula and resources that espouse and promote the old paradigm of modernistic Christianity. Many adults feel they have had to unlearn much of what they were overtly or covertly taught as children, but now their children are being taught many of the same things in the same ways. This widespread phenomenon

is frustrating pastors, leaders, and parents around the globe. Yet there continues to be silence regarding the spiritual formation of children within this movement. Through this essay, we the authors—an emerging church leader and apologist (Brian), a children’s spirituality scholar (Karen-Marie), a student of child theology and spirituality (Dave), and a concerned church leader (Dan)—want to take a necessary step in speaking about the spiritual formation of children within the emerging church movement.

Our contribution through this essay is by no means an exhaustive response to the lack of emerging voices speaking out for children. Nor is it the first response. Earlier in this decade, Ivy Beckwith noticed that, “Somewhere in our sincere quest to help children know and love God and live a life in the way of Jesus, we’ve lost our way” (Beckwith, 2004, p. 11). Through her book, *Postmodern Children’s Ministry*, she began a conversation regarding the spiritual formation of children in emerging church culture. Yet apart from *Postmodern Children’s Ministry* and her recent book, *Formational Children’s Ministry*, little has been said since the former book was released in 2004.

This article offers another voice for exploring how emerging communities can nurture the spiritual formation of children, and it serves as a second starting point for further thought, research, and advocacy on behalf of those children who remain voiceless within this movement. What 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 we invite into needed conversation parents, professional and volunteer educators, children themselves, and all disciples, since we all carry the call to pass 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.

Christian teaching and learning requires

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.

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” (p. 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 (1888) 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” (p. 4, emphasis original). 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, 2007, p. 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 (2005) has pointed out that “Every child always exists in multiple and often competing communities exercising formative, shaping influences on the child’s identity” (p. 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 ac-

cess 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, 2002). 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 ontol-

ogy (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.)” (p. 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 pres-

ents faith concepts to children, but also inducts them into a Christian way of life. Speaking about discipleship within the church in general, David Fitch (2005) 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, 1963, p. 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



©iStockphoto.com

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. (pp. 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, p. 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

Kevin Tankersley Photo



community. In what follows, we will describe what catechesis might look like in emerging communities.

Catechesis through Modeling the Teachings of Jesus

David Fitch (2005) 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"

(p. 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, 2004, p. 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. Com-

munities 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 intergenerational 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

Catechesis can provide an environment in which children can come to understand that God’s Story intersects with and informs their own stories.

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, 2005, p. 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 (1979) 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. (pp. 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 (2008) suggests, “Unplanned pregnancy is now a pop-culture staple” (p. 40). As a result, the teen birth rate

in the United States actually increased in 2006 for the first time in fifteen years (Gulli, 2008, p. 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, 2007). 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

Jesus welcomes children
into his arms and
affirms their place
in the kingdom of God.

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, 1971, pp. 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, 1971, pp. 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 (1964) 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, 2007, p. 3).

Nurturing all God’s children means that emerging faith communities should be careful not to catch the “bless-me bug” (McLaren,



2004a, p. 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, emphasis ours). 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 (2005, p. 153), who wrote, “Prayer is good but empty if we separate it from social justice.” 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, 2001, pp. 11-12).
- Over 46 million Americans are without health insurance (Sider, 2007, p. 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, p. 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

Faith communities in the emerging movement need to step up, take responsibility for injustice, and actively fight for the rights of children worldwide.

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, 2006, p. 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 (2000) 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* (2007), 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” (p. 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 (2007) called for when he said “Revolutionary leaders cannot think without the people, nor for the people, but only with the people” (p. 131, emphasis original). Children grow in faith when they think and act with those who suffer injustice and oppression.

Harvard psychologist Robert Coles (1997) has noted that “children add up, imitate, file away what they’ve observed” (p. 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 paper, 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 (2007) has noted, “Justice includes helping people return to the kind of life in community that God intends for them” (p. 72). Justice requires catechesis and rites of passage, for as

Marva Dawn (2003) has noted: “Without that mentoring [of catechumenal practices]... persons cannot be trained to ‘live’ their focal concerns” (p. 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, pp. 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).

REFERENCES

- Beckwith, I. (2010). *Formational children’s ministry: Shaping children using story, ritual, and relationship*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Beckwith, I. (2004). *Postmodern children’s ministry: Ministry to children in the 21st century*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Bushnell, H. (1888). *Christian nurture*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Claiborne, S. (2000) *Downward mobility in an upscale world*. *The Other Side* 36 (6), 11-15.
- Clark, M. H. (1975). *Where are the children?* New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Coles, R. (1997). *The moral intelligence of children: How to raise a moral child*. New York: Penguin Putnam.
- Couture, P. D. (2007). *Child poverty: Love, justice, and social responsibility*. St. Louis: Chalice.
- Csinos, D. (2007). *The biblical theme of welcoming children*. *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 8, 97-117.
- Dawn, M. J. (2003). *Unfettered hope: A call to faithful living in an affluent society*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Dylan, B. (1964). *The times they are a-changin’*. On *The times they are a-changin’* [Record]. New York: Columbia Records.
- Estes, R. J. & Weiner, N. A. (2001). *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
- Fitch, D. E. (2005). *The great giveaway: Reclaiming the mission of the church from big business, parachurch organizations, psychotherapy, consumer capitalism, and other modern maladies*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 30th anniversary edition. New York: Continuum.
- Frost, M. (2006). *Exiles: Living missionally in a post-Christian culture*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Groome, T. H. (2002). *Religious education and catechesis: No divorce, for the children’s sake*. *The Furrow* 52 (11), 587-596.
- Groome, T. H. (1980). *Christian religious education: Sharing our story and vision*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Gulli, C. (2008, January 28). *Suddenly Teen Pregnancy is Cool?* *Maclean’s*, 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. (1971). *The big little school: Sunday child of American Protestantism*. New York: Harper and Row.
- McLaren, B. D. (2005). *The last word and the word after that: A tale of faith, doubt, and a new kind of Christianity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McLaren, B. D. (2004a). *Bless this house?: Why efforts to renew the church are often misguided*. *Leadership* 25 (3), 96.
- McLaren, B. D. (2004b). *A generous orthodoxy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

- Mercer, J. A. (2005). *Welcoming children: A practical theology of childhood*. St. Louis: Chalice.
- Pascal, K. (producer/director). (2002). *Belonging: The search for acceptance* [Motion picture]. Markham, ON: Windborne Productions.
- Ramsey, P. (1979). *Do you know where your children are?* *Theology Today* 36 (1), 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. (2007). *Just generosity: A new vision for overcoming poverty in America*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Sider, R. J. (2005). *The scandal of the Evangelical conscience: Why are Christians living just like the rest of the world?* Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Torrence, T. F. (1963). *Catechism*. In *The Westminster dictionary of Christian education*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- UNICEF. (n.d.). *Child labour*. Retrieved July 30, 2008, from 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
- UNICEF. (n.d.). *Poverty reduction starts with children*. Retrieved July 30, 2008, from http://www.unicef.org/why/why_poverty.html
- Westerhoff, J. H. III. (2000). *Will our children have faith?* Revised ed. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse.
- Westerhoff, J. H. III. (1977). *A call to catechesis*. *The Living Light* 14(3), 354-8.
- Yust, K.-M. (2004). *Real kids, real faith: Practices for nurturing children's spiritual lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

I am not so sure of myself and do not claim to have all the answers. In fact, I often wonder quite openly about these “answers,” and about the habit of always having them ready. The best I can do is to look for some of the questions.

– Thomas Merton,

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander