



## Being a Child, Becoming Christian

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**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.

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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

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### 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

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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

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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

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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.

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## 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

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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.

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