

**Theology, Educational Theory, and Children’s Faith Formation:  
Findings from the *Faith Formation in Children’s Ministries* Project**  
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**Project Background, Aims and Purposes**

By examining the broad tendencies of Christian education theories about programming for children, as well as the particular manifestations of these theories and programs in specific local churches, the purpose of the *Faith Formation in Children’s Ministries* project has been to identify what encourages and what impedes a richer and fuller understanding of Christian faith formation in children. I have grounded descriptive and evaluative work of the project in a particular set of theological assumptions about the Christian life, the most central of which is that ***faith is a gift of God – an act of divine grace – rather than a set of beliefs or a well-developed cognitive understanding of spiritual things.*** This perspective on faith is not peculiar to me. Augustine played with this idea in his *Confessions* in the fourth century, many female and male mystics through the ages have embraced it, and Luther insisted upon it during the early years of the Protestant Reformation. A Presbyterian colleague noted that the seventeenth century Puritan debates about church membership that lead to the concept of the “half-way covenant” focused on the tension between the idea of grace inherent in the practice of infant baptism and the cognitive assent presumed to be part of adult conversion experiences. A Methodist colleague pointed out that John Wesley’s emphasis on “prevenient grace” in the mid-eighteenth century also promoted a strong emphasis on God’s gifting of humanity with faith.<sup>1</sup> However, the Enlightenment, and our consequent emphasis on rational thinking in the western world, has discouraged contemporary theologies of faith rooted strongly in grace rather than belief. Thus, my work has in part been about locating congregations and curricula that are reviving an emphasis on grace in their ministries with children and that are rethinking what it fundamentally means to be in a faithful (grace-filled) relationship with God as a child.

Six other themes have emerged as important theological concerns to consider in relation to children’s ministries as a consequence of claiming faith is a gift of God rather than a product of human action. They are:

1. ***Belonging.*** All people, whether children or adults, belong to the family of God – and thus to the body of Christ – because of God’s actions rather than our own actions. Many denominations symbolize this understanding of Christian belonging by their practice of infant baptism, and even traditions that emphasize “believer’s” baptism after an age of consent have developed parent-child dedication rituals to welcome children into the faith community. Embedded within the practice of both rituals is typically a question to the congregation as to their willingness to nurture the child’s faith, although the asking and answering of such a question may have little impact on the embodiment of that commitment. The theological theme of belonging highlights the communal nature of Christian faith and raises the question of how congregations “include” children in the community of faith to which they theologically belong by God’s action, whether or not they are recognized by the ecclesial structure as full voting members.

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<sup>1</sup> References throughout this report to comments from colleagues generally refer to ideas proffered during a day-long peer consultation held in January, 2002 or in follow-up conversations with those persons.

2. **Thanksgiving.** We are called by God to live our lives with a sense of gratitude for God's gracious love. The common usage of the Lord's Prayer in mainstream Protestant worship offers a starting place for this thankful response: rather than approaching life with a sense of entitlement, children and adults learn to pray daily for God's provision of what they need for the day, acknowledging their dependence on the one whose name is hallowed. The theological theme of thanksgiving raises a question about how children's ministries cultivate thankfulness among children in such a way that children learn an appropriate dependence on God rather than the heavily-emphasized cultural values of self-reliance and autonomy. Similarly, it prods congregations to consider how they will help children engage God as the one who forgives human sinfulness and continually offers salvation without subjecting children to moral expectations that foster excessive shame, guilt or fear.
3. **Giftedness.** Human beings are created by God, with specific and valuable gifts and abilities necessary for the wholeness of the body of Christ. Children are no less gifted than adults, although their gifts and abilities may manifest themselves differently at various ages and stages of their lives. If we believe that all God-given gifts are needed for the church to be whole, then the theological theme of giftedness raises the question of how congregations encourage children to identify and use their gifts for the development and well-being of the body of Christ.
4. **Hospitality.** This theological theme upholds the value of extending the fruits of God's gracious gift of faith to others. All persons are called to share the gifts they have been given so that God's realm may come in all its fullness. In order for children (and many adults) to fulfill this calling, at least two things are necessary. First, children must have experiences of hospitality within their faith communities so that they can draw upon this experiential knowledge in fashioning hospitable relationships with people outside their congregation. (This reinforces the importance of addressing the questions raised under the theme of "belonging".) Second, those whose gifts have been recognized by the church – pastors, teachers, lay leaders of all sorts – must make room for other, less church program-oriented, gifts to be affirmed and nurtured by the congregation as a means of encouraging God's realm to come quickly. The question raised by hospitality is one of how congregations encourage children to live their faith outside the church walls.
5. **Understanding.** Both children and adults seek spiritual awareness by reflecting – as they are able – on their experience of God's gracious promise to be our God and upon God's stated expectation that we will, in return, be God's people as the church (gathered and scattered). The theological theme of understanding raises the question of how congregations are enabling and encouraging children to reflect critically on their relationship with God in developmentally appropriate ways.
6. **Hope.** Christians engage life with the expectation that something more exists than that which we most obviously can see or know. We live expectantly (as many congregations embody liturgically during the season of Advent), joyously (as Easter people in response to the resurrection of Christ), and empowered (as post-Pentecost recipients of the Holy

Spirit). The theological theme of hope raises the question of how congregations introduce children to the mystery of the triune God whom we worship and serve and to the passion for communal justice that God desires among God's people.

The work of the project, then, has generated and operated in relationship with this dynamically-evolving cluster of theological concerns as I have focused on answering the three general questions originally posed in the grant proposal: How are adults (pastors, teachers, church members, parents, directors of Christian education) currently educating and forming children in the Christian faith? What are the key resources currently used and deployed in the work of education and formation? What do "best practices" in children's education and formation look like? These questions are broad, as befits a project designed to sketch the landscape (current state) and horizons (newly emerging approaches) of children's faith formation processes in mainstream Protestant congregations. Each of them invites primarily descriptive responses, although all description is shaped by the one who provides it, and the third question implicitly invokes the idea that there are criteria by which one can identify "best practices" in children's ministries. In the portion of the research report provided here, both the shape of my discussion of some of the findings related to the first two questions and the criteria by which I judge what might constitute "best practices" in children's ministries represent a dynamic interaction between my own evolving understanding of the theological themes articulated above, my careful attempts to develop "thick" descriptions of the printed curricula and congregational programs I studied (in the style of Clifford Geertz's ethnographic approach to interpreting cultures), my attentiveness to the internal criteria and coherence of children's ministry programs, and my openness to emergent ideas and themes over the three and a half year course of the research.<sup>2</sup>

### **Summary of Curricular Findings**

There are a dozen significant trends and characteristics in contemporary children's ministry curricular resources that serve as markers of mainstream Protestant churches' beliefs about children's nature (religious anthropology), learning styles (pedagogy), children's relationships with God (theology/spirituality), and children's roles in the church (ecclesiology). They are:

1. A propensity to moralize (regardless of whether their theological orientation is liberal or conservative)
2. An increasing emphasis in printed materials on interaction among children's ministry leaders, parents and worship leaders
3. The adoption (often uncritically) of experiential learning methodologies
4. The development of technology-based supplemental teaching tools, such as software programs, CD-ROMs and web pages
5. A counter-emphasis on reclaiming space (through silence and stillness) in children's worlds for wonder and personal responses to the faith narrative
6. A re-manifestation of learning centers in the workshop rotation model

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<sup>2</sup> The full report runs 60 single-spaced pages. To facilitate our discussion in this setting, I am including the summary section for the curriculum review, the overview of the site visit process, and selected findings from the program observations.

7. A tendency to circumscribe prayer practices or eliminate them altogether
8. A propensity to replace the scriptures with other interpretations of the biblical story
9. The substitution of contemporary cultural icons for traditional liturgical symbols
10. An assumption that “busyness” and “productivity” are necessary for children to learn
11. A tendency to tightly script the teacher’s role as a way of reducing teacher anxiety and insuring that specific information is disseminated to children
12. A failure to educate teachers about the theologies and educational philosophies behind the materials they are using

As I discussed some of these markers with several colleagues, one of them – drawing on the work of Margaret Guider – remarked that contemporary curricula don’t seem to see children as distinct and contributing persons who are fully “present” in the faith community; rather, children are viewed as vessels that need filling with the “correct” religious information before they can participate in communal life. This perspective implicitly says that children don’t really “belong” in the church as children; they (and their families) are instead recipients of the church’s educational services. It fosters the development of children’s ministries within a culture of consumer satisfaction rather than a practice of genuine hospitality. Some of the by-products of this quest for consumer satisfaction, such as the burgeoning attention to experiential learning methodologies and to providing music and artistic images on technology-based resources, can enhance children’s learning. They are at least a nod in the direction of acknowledging children’s giftedness. Models like the workshop rotation approach also demonstrate some awareness on the part of some publishers and Christian educators that deeper learning occurs when children encounter biblical stories repeatedly and through various means. But we must also ask what it is that children learn in the children’s ministries programs that use a “typical” curriculum. Most lesson plans provide little time or direction for encouraging children to reflect on their relationship with God apart from prescribed truths, to identify and use their gifts for the development and well-being of the body of Christ, to live their faith outside the church walls in something other than prescribed and socially-approved moral behaviors, or to develop an appreciation for the mystery of the triune God and a passion for communal justice. When we tightly script teacher’s roles and insist on children’s busyness and productivity through numerous activities and rewards for quickness, we fail to communicate the value of silently experiencing or pondering the amazing love of the God upon whom we depend for our creation, redemption, and sustenance. Instead, we convey a theology of “works righteousness” in which performing certain mental computations – “if the teacher asks a question, the answer must be God” – and craft activities leads to eventual membership in the church. When we acknowledge children’s different gifts and abilities in our teaching methods, but then do not provide frequent opportunities for them to use those gifts for building up the body of Christ, we reinforce the cultural values of self-development and autonomous action rather than providing space for children to explore the Christian themes of giftedness and hospitality. We unwittingly promote an ecclesiology that endorses personal growth without communal accountability. When we neglect tradition, we lose the powerful framework of the liturgical calendar as a means of nurturing Christian identity and hope. When we convert spiritual practices into tools for conveying moral points, we deprive children of a rich relationship with God upon which to reflect. These disconnections from the spiritual traditions of Christianity exacerbate the division of “religion” from “spirituality” and can even promote the idea that children’s spirituality is somehow “damaged” by too much religious language or ritual. (This may be yet another reason

that traditional liturgical symbols are considered passé.) Thus, the “typical” curriculum resource, rather than encouraging a richer and fuller understanding of Christian faith formation in children, may actually impede children’s spiritual formation without congregations being aware that it has this affect.

## Overview and Selected Observations from Site Visits

The curriculum of children’s faith formation is not limited to packaged materials. Children are being formed (or not) in faith by the whole context of congregational life. The second half of my research in the *Faith Formation in Children’s Ministries* project focused on where and how congregations are engaged in ministries with children. This qualitative evaluation of congregational ministries has involved identifying and working with 11 congregations engaged in some intriguing form of intentional ministry with children over the last 18 months. All of the participating congregations were selected because I had discovered – through various networking strategies - someone involved with those ministries who has a vision for children’s faith formation that intentionally moves beyond the traditional Sunday school model and includes theological and pedagogical reflection on the practice of children’s ministry. They represent seven denominations: three are Presbyterian, one is United Methodist, two are Episcopalian, two are Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), two are Evangelical Lutheran, and one is an American Baptist/United Church of Christ dual affiliate. Three of the congregations have fewer than 150 members (pastor-centered), five have between 200-400 members (transitional pastor/program-centered), two have between 500-800 members (program-centered), and one has over 2,000 members (corporate).<sup>3</sup> Eight could be described as “mixed income” (meaning that both lower and middle class populations are significantly represented), two are middle class to affluent, and one is predominantly affluent. Most are predominantly white congregations, although three have some racial mix among their members and one is racially and intentionally multicultural. I visited each congregation once for several days to observe worship, formal children’s ministries programs (e.g. church school, children’s church, children’s music programs, weekday preschools, church nurseries, and midweek programs), and informal interactions with and by children around the church’s general activities. I also interviewed church leaders, parents and teachers. Some of my observations are summarized below.

**Children’s ministries are heavily dependent on the vision, energy and creativity of one or two persons in the congregation, usually – but not always – the Director of Christian Education or an associate pastor.** If this person were to leave, the innovative ministries they are trying to create would revert to more traditional models or would cease. Early in the research process, I located three exciting children’s ministries lead by theologically reflective and methodologically creative professional educators and/or teaching ministers. I planned to include their congregations in this study, only to have those persons notify me a few months later that they would not be continuing in their ministries because their congregations did not consider

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<sup>3</sup> These figures typically represent the number of people on the church rolls, which is why my type characterizations of them do not follow the traditional numeric breakdowns used by Alban Institute consultants. Alban calculates size based on the number of *active* members, which is frequently 50-75 percent smaller than the total listed on church rolls. Since the congregations I visited tended to report their size to me in terms of total membership (or everyone listed in the church directory), I used worship attendance figures from the day I visited and from newsletter and worship bulletin reports to more accurately assess their practical group size and thus, to consider how the research Alban has done relative to group size might help me interpret what I observed in any particular congregation.

their work with children “essential” enough to the life of the church to continue their positions when balancing the church budget required austerity measures. As a colleague pointed out, this devaluation of the teaching ministry of the church reflects a congregational emphasis on pastoral care (embodied in the “encouraging” sermons and visitation work of the pastor or senior minister) rather than nurture and formation. It also creates a significant barrier to the development of a congregational theology of ministry with children or the communal implementation of the vision held by the person on whom that ministry depends. When the primary person seeks to empower others by delegating authority or tasks, the theological and methodological import of her or his vision rarely transfers with the task. The nuances of a particular theological perspective or educational model “get lost” between a program director’s articulation of them at teacher training events and teachers’ implementation of a program in the classroom. Also, the commitment level of volunteers to implementing a new educational model in its fullness seems linked to how involved the DCE or associate pastor is in the recruiting. If the children’s ministries leader delegates the recruitment task to lay volunteers, the message about the goals and expectations of the ministry model that prospective teachers receive is “diluted” by the recruiters because they both lack a sophisticated understanding of the model and because they fear the commitment required will frighten off new volunteers.

**Parents are viewed as the primary educators of children by both church leaders and parents themselves.** This is not a new perspective, nor is it necessarily incorrect. Seventeenth century ministers characterized the family as a critical place of religious training, and Horace Bushnell, in his nineteenth century classic, *Christian Nurture*, emphasized the essential role of the parent in a child’s religious development. In the contemporary American Protestant congregation, this role is primarily embraced through parental enrollment of children in a church school program and reinforced by the congregational expectation that parents will volunteer as church school teachers or children’s ministry program assistants. Parents, in part because American culture assigns them primary responsibility for the raising of their own children, are expected by society to provide all the resources necessary for a healthy and successful adulthood. For many parents, providing access to a form of religious training remains one aspect of their sense of what a “good” parent does. However, they rarely view themselves as true religious educators or as transmitters of a faith community’s tradition. Rather, they tend to function as “chauffeurs” to a place of religious teaching and dutiful contributors to the church school in ways similar to their weekday school volunteerism. One DCE reported that parents have said in response to her request for church school volunteers, “why should I get up get ready and bring my child in order to teach him or her myself?” Penny, a parent of three and chair of her congregation’s Christian education committee, particularly emphasized the need for church leaders to reinforce this sense of duty despite resistance, even when teaching church school means parents cannot participate in congregational worship because the two occur at the same time. “Parents shouldn’t expect to be in church more than one or two Sundays a month and instead should be working [in Sunday School],” she declared. This apparently widespread assumption that the principle role of parents as religious educators is to provide access to religious programming and dutifully assist in the classroom helps to explain the next observation.

**Intentional efforts to form children in faith tend to stop at the minivan door.** Church school crafts, curriculum take-home sheets, etc. rarely make it out of the family car. Mary Jane, a parent of three who helps recruit teachers for her congregation’s workshop rotation model

church school program, noted that she hadn't seen much change in her children's learning since that program began two years earlier, since "we don't follow up much at home, then or now." However, she did comment, "I'm guessing the stories mean more to them because they hear them more," a statement her ten year old daughter reinforced by nodding as her mother spoke. Laura, who teaches church school and tries to talk a little with her children about worship on the way home from church, still noted, "The crafts rarely make it out of the van, though." A third mother, Yvonne, reported that she saves her children's church crafts along with their school crafts, but her motivation is not faith formation. Rather, she believes, "All this saving improves their self-image and self-esteem and shows I'm proud of them." Since few parents understand themselves as religious educators at home, even when they are children's ministries volunteers, children's faith formation has become episodic. Faith teaching is generally contained within the space and time of a particular Christian education program. The exception to this general rule are parents like Barbara, a mother of two young children who tries to think "about how traditional family practices can be linked to more religious practices and traditions." Barbara offers a Christian parenting class periodically in her church and has developed a web site for parents interested in nurturing their children's faith through family rituals. She does these things because she personally could find very few resources to support the linkage between congregation and home in a way she thought consistent with her Episcopal faith. However, she has noticed that her commitment to nurturing her spirituality goes far beyond that of the other parents in her church.

**“Moral values” and “safe spaces” are more important to many parents than formation in faith.** Listening to my descriptions of the children's ministries I visited, senior religious education scholar Charles Foster commented that parents and church leaders no longer seem to be asking John Westerhoff's classic question, "Will our children have faith?" but instead are wondering, "Will our children be moral?"<sup>4</sup> As noted earlier in the summary of curricular findings, general perceptions of the relationship of morality to spirituality and faith have evolved in such a way that many adults equate faithfulness primarily (perhaps even solely) with being moral. This equation became apparent in my conversations with parents, several of whom described their congregations as "safe" spaces with "good" kids for their children to associate with, unlike the more "dangerous" (morally ambiguous) locations of neighborhood or school. Yvonne, a mother of two who attends church regularly with her children, told me, "I want my kids to get positive role models and positive influences from other 'good' kids. I want them to learn the things they don't get in school: how to be a good person, a caring person, and to treat others with respect. To learn to discern who are good kids to play with and who to avoid." Claude, a father and grandfather who is raising both an eleven year old daughter and a seven year old granddaughter, remarked that he valued "the Christian instruction in etiquette and manners that they can't get anywhere else." Denise, who has two preschoolers, is already thinking about her children's teenage years: "This seems like a good place to hang out versus other places they could hang out." Sometimes parents focus on the ways in which participation in a children's ministry program will reinforce particular social values they hold dear. Leslie, a mother of two, said, "I'm looking for socialization rather than a particular faith. Basic principles: everyone

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<sup>4</sup> As part of the grant project, I formally consulted twice with Charles Foster, now Professor of Religion and Education Emeritus (Candler School of Theology) and Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teachers, to discuss my research findings and the evolving shape of the project in response to those findings. Our first meeting was September 15, 2000; our other formal discussion occurred May 20, 2001.

treated fairly and has an opportunity. This reinforces the culture of fairness we teach at home and they get in daycare. It enhances the value system we want.” Now that her congregation has opened its after school program to children of non-church members, she hesitates to send her seven year old son because it is no longer the “cozy and comfortable” safe space it was when only “church children” attended. Her discomfort with and fear of persons she characterizes as “other” seemingly creates no internal dissonance in relation to her self-professed values of fairness and equal opportunity for all, although she has recognized that her pastors and the DCE see things differently. A colleague reflected that this mother and other parents are imitating the mother of the sons of Zebedee (who wanted her offspring to sit on Jesus’ right hand in the kingdom) in their desire for the church to help their children be safe, happy and successful.

Parents also want churches to function as replacements for geographically (and sometimes emotionally) distant extended families. When Francis went looking for a church she and her daughter could attend, she chose a congregation that conveyed a “feeling of extended family.” Debbie, whose son and daughter are now teens, reported that her children have “got the idea of church as family and God is love.” These parents want congregations to be places where their children are protected from the “real” world in a continuation of the nineteenth century desire for church and family to be places of refuge from the “evils” of society. Nancy, mother of three teen and young adult sons and a two year old daughter, said, “[You] can’t let kids run around in the neighborhood anymore, so we have to create safe places for them to move around and interact with adults.” This assumption that congregations are, by definition, safe places for children, is problematic in at least two ways. First, the preference for homogeneity that often accompanies this assumption – as in Leslie’s remarks – raises theological questions about what it means to welcome the stranger, to minister to the prisoner or the “Gentile”, and to carry out the Great Commission. Congregations need to explore these questions with parents so that parents have a greater understanding of the purposes and goals of faith formation. Second, recent news stories revealing the Catholic Church’s failure to address the prevention of child sexual abuse vigorously enough to protect children from abuse by church leaders underscore the fact that faith communities cannot assume that they are immune from human wrongdoing. (In fact, the reluctance of many Protestant congregations to establish sexual abuse prevention policies and procedures mirrors the hesitancy now being condemned among Catholics.)

**Little pedagogical value is placed on children’s experiences and teachers are uncomfortable with children’s honest discussion of difficult issues, yet children still try to engage in theological reflection on their experiences in the church.** In my conversations with children’s ministries leaders and teachers, I heard widespread ambivalence about the usefulness of permitting the “stuff” of children’s lives to have space in children’s ministry programs, especially church school. One godly play teacher said, “Things they bring in from the outside world are so important to them. When I’m looking at them bringing their world into the response time, I don’t really know what to do. Can I say I wonder how this is related to the story from today?” Other adults lamented the inevitable presence of children’s conversation about their daily lives and generally characterized these comments as “distractions” from real learning about God. At the same time, these professionals and volunteers felt they must adapt whatever educational model they were using to accommodate children’s social, personal, and developmental needs (as those are stereotypically defined), even if such accommodations undercut the goals and purposes of the model. This was particularly evident in congregations



that used curricula advocating the use of silence in the teaching/learning process. Teachers were uncomfortable training students to welcome silence as a way of encountering God, since these adults believed that it was abnormal for children to refrain from socializing with one another. They could justify asking children to “be quiet” while adults were talking, because being quiet is a basic principle of polite social behavior and recognizes the culturally defined social authority of adults over children, but expecting children to sit silently in contemplation seemed “insensitive” or “inhumane” to them.

I also observed several incidents in which teachers ignored children’s attempts to wrestle with difficult issues, in part because the teachers considered the children’s thoughts or actions problematic. One such incident occurred in a sixth grade church school class that was studying the story of the rich man and Lazarus. After the class had dramatized the story using a curriculum-provided script, the teachers began asking “discussion questions” (also included in the curriculum). Not having much success with the scripted questions, one teacher asked, “What did you get out of this?” A boy in the class responded, “Entertainment.” “What else?” asked the teacher. A girl answered, “I worked on my reading skills.” The other teacher pointed the children back to the story’s themes of being rich and poor, then asked “What other ways can we be rich besides financial?” One girl shared about going to buy contact lenses and seeing homeless men holding up signs requesting work or other help by the highway exit. She reported that her mother locked the doors of the car and kept driving. The rest of the children responded that they thought holding up signs about being homeless was “stupid” and “a waste of rich people’s time.” The teachers ignored the particular character of this entire discourse, shifting the conversation to how people in their church have enough stuff to share some of it with others if they choose.

A second incident occurred in a Kindergarten – Second Grade Children’s Worship program in late September 2001. Just before moving from a discussion of the focus theme of heroes (linked loosely to the story of Easter) into a “wild and crazy game,” the lead teacher asked, “Oh, did anyone bring any offering?” Two boys got up from the circle and took their quarters over to the wooden church bank sitting on a nearby table. While the rest of the group watched, one child pulled off the church bank’s removable steeple and announced, “Look, it’s the planes that hit the World Trade Center!” as he “flew” his coin into the building. Neither teacher commented explicitly on the action, even when the second child followed suit. Instead, the lead teacher launched into a mini lecture on “who heroes really are”, although none of her examples drew on the heroic actions associated with the September 11 tragedy so powerfully evoked by the children’s actions.<sup>5</sup>

However, despite adult misperceptions about their needs and misguided choices about how to accommodate those needs, children still manage to initiate meaningful statements about

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<sup>5</sup> I find this avoidance particularly interesting because the uncle of a child in this congregation – although not of a child in this class – was killed in the collapse of the towers, and this fact was widely known in the church and the wider community because of the media attention given the victim’s mother, who also lived in the area. The DCE in this congregation reported that she had tried to provide information to parents about how to help their children cope with this national (and local) tragedy, but there had been no efforts to train church school teachers to incorporate responses to the tragedy in the classroom. Such efforts had been made with weekday preschool teachers, since the child attended that program as well and the parents had requested the school’s support in helping their child cope with the situation.

the importance of the spiritual life for themselves and others. Another incident related to the September 11 tragedy occurred in a First – Third Grade church school class in March 2002. During a discussion of Jesus' commandment to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," the lead teacher asked, "Do you think bin Laden follows the Golden Rule?" The children quickly answered, "No way!" Then one girl said, "But I still want to pray for him" and a boy added, "Every night I pray for peace and that the people over there will win." The teacher then concluded the lesson by reading the printed prayer from the teacher's guide of the curriculum. Despite her willingness to bring the topic of Osama bin Laden into the children's discussion, the teacher missed an opportunity to respond with affirmation and action related to the children's theological reflections about the relevance of prayer for one's enemies and for peace. The children, however, took the little bit of space provided by the question to think theologically about their own application of the Golden Rule.

Other examples of children demonstrating a keen sense of the importance of theological reflection and spiritual practices emerged in my interviews and observations. Beverly, parent of a first grader and a Godly Play storyteller at her church, reported that her son decided to "share silence" with his after school group during show and tell time. "He works on silence for himself – it's hard for him," she said. Kathy, a parent and Presbyterian minister, related the story of her children's reactions to the news that they would be hosting in their home a sixteen year old girl from out-of-state who needed a place to stay before a medical procedure. Kathy's eight year old daughter asked why the girl's family wasn't going to be with her, and Kathy explained that they couldn't come. Kathy's four and a half year old son replied, "It doesn't matter. If she needs a house, Jesus says we're supposed to give her one." Dinah, mother of two young children, recalled her embarrassment as well as her pride when her seven year old daughter became really excited about collecting shoes for a church drive with the theme of following Jesus' commandment to care for the poor. "[She] wanted to make announcements at school. She asked out-of-town relatives for shoes when we went there for Thanksgiving." Her daughter's enthusiasm clearly took Dinah by surprise because it seemed out of proportion with the church's expectation that families would donate their own old shoes but not those of others.

A teacher of a second grade church school class was also surprised by her students' responses to a lesson, but in her case, the surprise was more a source of frustration than embarrassment and pride. She asked the children to tell her how they thought God talks to them since Jesus died. Since her lesson theme was about the importance of the Bible for people today, she wanted the children to say that the Bible is the way that God talks with people today. But several of the children responded that prayer is the way God talks to us and we talk to God. The teacher, clearly frustrated by her inability to elicit the correct response, ignored their answers and continued to repeat her question, finally saying, "the Bible is the way God talks to people!" before giving the class a short lecture on the importance of memorizing scripture. One can only hope that the children's own reflections on the importance of prayer as a means of being in relationship with God will be reinforced in other settings.

One can also hope that children's reflections are more broadly valued than my research suggests, but the experience of a colleague that reviewed this data suggests otherwise. She reports that children are often surprised when she asks them what they really think about a biblical story or a theological theme. Several other colleagues recalled the old joke about the

pastor who is trying to get a group of children to guess what he is describing. All the attributes the pastor lists belong to a squirrel, but none of the children are venturing guesses, even though the clues are fairly obvious. Finally, goes the joke, one child says, “Well, I know the answer you’re looking for is ‘Jesus’ but it sounds like a squirrel to me!” The example of the second grade teacher (above) would suggest that children are right to assume that there is a “correct” answer they are expected to provide when quizzed about theological matters. The miracle is that children continue to reflect on the gospel and come to different conclusions despite the propensity of children’s ministry programs to teach the specific “points” identified in their printed curricular resources.

**Children are “overhearing”, “overseeing”, and “imitating” the faith whenever they are given chances to do so.** An older elementary child in one congregation, designated as the acolyte for the day, also moved easily within the priestly role of distributing offering plates to the deacons and receiving and placing the congregation’s gifts on the altar during the sung doxology. The first grader (mentioned above) who decided to “share silence” with his after school group in show and tell was imitating his experience in a godly play church school class. A preschool girl, quietly coached by her mother, approaches others during the Passing of the Peace with hand outstretched and the words, “Peace be with you.” Another preschool girl in a different congregation, working with her church school class to make personal symbols to contribute to a class “Body of Christ” poster, insists on making a symbol for the visiting observer taking notes in the corner because she wants the visitor to feel included in God’s family too. A two year old stands on the pew swaying rhythmically while the congregation sings the communion canticle, then asks loudly, “What happened to the music?” when it ends. A five or six year old boy drinks his portion of communion juice and proclaims, “Yum!”, drawing smiles from the adults standing nearby and an embarrassed “shhh” from his mother. Several elementary age children, as they individually leave and return during a Rite I service in their Episcopal congregation, stop and genuflect in the center aisle in the same manner as the adults present. A second grade boy pauses in his coloring to join with the rest of the congregation in the first two thirds of the Lord’s Prayer before forgetting the words that follow. A couple of pews in front of him, a two year old boy converses loudly with his mother, asking, “We go up now? Now?” loudly during the Great Thanksgiving and declaring “We should get that!” in an indignant tone as the first group is served communion at the chancel rail while he must wait until his pew is called forward. Preschool and younger elementary children spontaneously respond “Thanks be to God” when their children’s chapel director concludes the benediction. Three year olds who’ve had at least a few weeks experience in their weekday preschool chapel service share (without prompting) their thank you prayers in the form taught by their leader: “Thank you God, for my (named person/thing).” Says one four year old in another class in the same preschool, “My mommy says that God is my father; thank you, God.”

Of course, children also observe and imitate congregational behavior that may not contribute positively to their formation in faith. Fathers bounced babies and children swayed to the music of a praise band during a contemporary worship service in which few of the adults present sang the songs as instructed, resulting, as one colleague pointed out, in a catechesis of listening rather than of active participation in singing the faith. The child “shushed” following his expression of delight in drinking from the cup may have second thoughts about the appropriateness of his pleasurable experience of God’s grace. Printed and verbal instructions

that families with children should sit near the back and exit if the children become disruptive set up their own fulfillment because children's distance from the main activity of the service "up front" makes it difficult for them to see and hear what is happening and thus become engaged in it. However, despite the liability that children will "oversee" and "overhear" undesirable aspects of the faith community's life together, children need to spend more time in worship and other intergenerational settings where they would have additional opportunities to participate in and identify with the liturgical culture of their faith tradition.

**Children are often invited to "play" at worship in "children's church" rather than to participate in the intergenerational worship life of the congregation.** Almost all the congregations I visited expected children (especially preschool and early elementary children) to absent themselves from all or most of the service of worship. While one congregation conducted a "Children's Chapel" service that followed a simplified version of the congregation's denominational liturgy, most provided an eclectic mix of praise songs, prayers, games and craft activities. A colleague reflected that in many faith communities, congregational worship has no clear theology, so it should not be surprising that worship experiences provided for children do not either. Another colleague commented that most children's church programs are more likely to be experiences of "worship impoverishment" than the "worship enrichment" experiences church leaders claim them to be. In one congregation, younger elementary children complained about the "baby" (four-piece) puzzles they were required to color and assemble as the sermon story response time. Another congregation states in the order of service that they provide "children's worship" following the children's time in congregational worship, but the associate pastor admitted that the time is really "child care" provided by two adolescent girls who are paid to plan and supervise a craft that may or may not be "religious." The three teens leading children's worship in another congregation began by invoking a worship mood resonant with the godly play model: "We are in God's house, where we talk softer and more slowly," then following the brief gathering prayer with a rowdy clap and slap version of "Jesus Loves Me", a significant break with silence and soft, slow speaking. Another congregation hires a teacher from the on-site Montessori school to lead its children's worship; when that person failed to show up on the day of my visit, the DCE pulled out leftover craft kits from the supply cupboard to amuse the children until the congregational service ends. She explained that the hired person would generally do the same thing. Even the congregation that utilizes a simplified form of the Episcopal liturgy for its children's chapel sacrifices its engagement in its planned format to accommodate children's musical "performances" in congregational worship.

**Children are primarily viewed as "performers" when they participate as leaders in congregational worship and as potential "disruptions" when they are otherwise present.** Children's choirs are the principle way in which children lead in congregational worship, but few children or choir leaders recognize themselves as worship leaders. One choir leader told the children in her group, "This song is really new to you, but we're going to perform it today, and if you really concentrate you'll get a prize afterward!" In both instances where a children's choir was singing during one of my site visits, the choir was lined up outside the sanctuary until just before the point in the service where their anthem occurred. Then the children were ushered into the sanctuary to sing and escorted back out again once they were done. In one case, the congregation applauded following the children's musical offering, and several parents were taking photographs.

Several congregations invite children to serve as acolytes, although the lack of education about this liturgical practice results in children simply performing a task in front of an approving audience rather than understanding themselves as worship leaders. One congregation involved children in this role by designating an adult volunteer who would simply “grab” a couple of children just before the service each week and ask them to “help out” by lighting and extinguishing the candles that morning. One congregation, in an intentional effort to incorporate children into a traditional liturgist role, invites one or more elementary age children to read the appointed Psalm for the morning, although the children receive no training to prepare them for this leadership role. Several adults in this church commented that they like to have the children visible because it means the congregation isn’t as close to extinction as it was ten years earlier. A parent of three children in another congregation commented that she likes both the children’s time and the use of child acolytes because it means her children are getting “all kinds of experience in leadership.” By this she meant “learning to speak in front of people” and to perform certain functions correctly in front of a large group, skills they will need in the “real world” someday.

A process similar to the choir situation occurred in one congregation engaged in a baby dedication ceremony. Parents and children waited outside the sanctuary side door with a church staff person until just before the time for the dedication. Then the families were ushered into the sanctuary for the brief ceremony and back out the door to drop their infants and other young children in the nursery before rejoining the service of worship. Thus, the infants and their young siblings had the least opportunity possible to disrupt the service. As noted above, several congregations encourage families to sit near the back of the sanctuary so “disruptive” children can be removed quickly, even though this placement complicates children’s participation in the service. An associate pastor in a congregation that resists making such a request nevertheless fosters the older children’s exodus from the service by refusing to “get worked up about” the child-initiated practice of leaving the sanctuary to roam the rest of the building or neighborhood until the congregational fellowship time following worship. Citing the children’s “meaningful encounters with God in Sunday School,” she noted, “it’s a long time to sit and they’re bored; it’s not a big deal.” A well-meaning DCE leading a children’s church service reinforced the expectation that a child’s primary role in congregational worship is to be quiet when she explained the reason she wants the children to be quiet in their own chapel service is because the “adults in the sanctuary want you to be quiet in there” and “you wouldn’t want to disturb them.”

**The Bible has an ambiguous role in children’s ministries.** Sometimes it is merely an object to be viewed, sometimes a study tool, sometimes a storybook, and sometimes an absent referent. In two congregations, children were encouraged by adult leaders in children’s church to place a “Bible” (in one case, it was actually a Bible storybook) on their chapel or classroom altar as part of a ritual of preparation for worship. The “Bible”, however, remained on the altar unused during the entire service while the leaders either engaged in activities without reference to a biblical narrative or told a faith narrative without acknowledging its biblical connections. In another congregation, children were engaged in a unit called “Bible Basics” and in several classrooms the Bibles provided for the children remained on the supply shelves unused. The fifth graders in a fourth congregation watched a *Beginner’s Bible* video and then began working

on word search puzzles, while the copies of the *International Children's Bible* set out at each child's place went untouched. A six grade teacher in another congregation led her students through a curriculum-provided script of the story of Lazarus and the rich man, then introduced the class discussion time with the comment, "Sometime I'd like to read this in the Bible, but I think the play tells the story pretty well." When the children struggled to answer her questions about the story, she referred them to the script rather than their Bibles for assistance. (Is it any wonder that one girl, asked to say what she got out of the story dramatization, replied, "Worked on my reading skills"?)

Preschool teachers in three congregations placed more emphasis on the connections between the Bible as a particular book and the stories they were telling. One kept a Bible in a "Bible Story Box" decorated like a gift box. He gathered the children around him on floor around the box, then opened it and took out a Bible. He turned to the story of Lazarus and the rich man, pointed out the place to the children, then closed the Bible, put it in the box, and began telling the story. While young children might quickly lose the connection between their teacher pointing to a place in a book he put away and the story they are hearing, the ritual of opening the box and pointing out the text – if practiced weekly – does begin to convey a connection between the Bible and the story told. However, the closing of the book and its placement in a box also sends a message about the limited role and authority of the book in the children's lives. A better practice is that of an "older fours" teacher, who had the Bible open beside her while she told the story and pointed to the words she was reading from the Bible as she repeated the morning's memory verse from the story. This teacher then helped the children create a bookmark to take home and place in their own Bibles to mark the place of the story and memory verse. Her actions encourage the children to engage the Bible rather than simply listen to information about the Bible. A third teacher sent a mixture of messages in her use of the Bible. Gathering the children around her, she held up a closed Bible and said, "This is the Bible." A new child in the class asked, "What's the Bible?" The teacher replied, "The Bible is the book of God." She then told the children she was going to read the Emmaus story from this Bible, which was an "adult Bible." Another child said, "We don't have an adult Bible, we just have a children's Bible." The teacher responded by explaining that their story for the day "isn't in the children's Bibles" so she had to read it from the adult Bible. While this teacher explicitly sought to help the children recognize the biblical source of the Emmaus story, she unwittingly conveyed that there are different Bibles with different stories for children and adults, rather than acknowledging that what was being identified as a "children's Bible" was in fact a Bible storybook containing only selected stories from the biblical narrative. A similar double message is conveyed by the congregation in which the children placed as Bible storybook as the "Bible" on their altar, especially since additional copies of the storybook are placed next to the "adult" Bibles in the sanctuary pew racks.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In many ways, the curricula available to teachers reinforce problematic habits relative to Bible usage. A typical curriculum like Group's *Hands On Bible Curriculum* instructs teachers to provide information about the Bible but rarely provides lessons in which students are encouraged to engage the Bible for themselves in a variety of ways. With younger students, lessons call for the ritual introduction of the Bible as a symbolic object – much like the practices used by the preschool teachers in the congregations I observed – and for the use of the Bible as a textbook or study tool that provides "right" answers in older elementary grades – a practice not employed by most of the volunteers I met, although the sentiment existed. Nowhere are teachers encouraged to view the Bible as the living Word of God, to be studied and prayed as a daily companion on one's spiritual journey.

### **Children's prayer lives are scripted and controlled by the adults who teach them.**

The most obvious example of this phenomenon is teacher reliance on the scripted prayers provided in church school curricula as the primary, if not the sole, means by which they pray with children. Opening and closing class prayers become moments for conveying the "point" of the lesson for the day rather than encounters with God. But there are other ways that adults control the prayer lives of children. A children's church leader asks each child in the group to say two prayers, a "thank you" prayer for something or someone and a "please" prayer that asks God to take care of someone. After all the children have prayed, the leader repeats the children's "please" prayers, implying, noted a colleague, that the children's own petitions are insufficient and somehow need the teacher's prayer to make them "official". Another mechanism of control lies in the usual practice of having the teacher do all the praying in the church school or children's worship setting. Children learn from this practice that their role in prayer is to assume a particular body posture – eyes closed, hands in lap – and listen to the words of an adult. Since they rarely experience prayer involving other body postures – prostration, standing with arms outstretched, kneeling – or other verbal and non-verbal forms, they develop very limited notions of what constitutes an authentic prayer.

### **Conclusion**

I share this portion of the final research project report about what constitutes effective formation of children in Christian faith as a prelude to what I hope will be an energetic and ongoing conversation about this topic. Let me end this opening statement by summarizing my current understanding of what conditions and orientations must exist within children's ministries for them to be effective. Five characteristics come to mind. First, effective formation requires the engagement of the family and of the congregation as an extended family of faith, creating opportunities for relationships with multiple adults who are also being formed in faith. Second, children must be accepted for who they are and encouraged to participate in the life of the community (including its leadership) as they are able. Third, children must be involved in learning contexts that provide them with resources – language, practices, rituals, habits – that enable them to participate with all their sense in the worshipping community. Fourth, children must experience the Christian scriptures as narrative rather than as proof text or a collection of moral points, and they must have opportunities to imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the biblical narrative. Fifth, children must be permitted to encounter the living God directly, mediated only by their own particularity and the various constructs any individual brings to an experience of the holy. 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. Children's faith formation is fundamentally about nurturing their relationships with God, and in all aspects of children's ministries, we would do well to let children meet God face to face.