



# Faith Development in Educational Ministry with Children

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**F**AITH DEVELOPMENT CAN BE DISCUSSED FROM SEVERAL PERSPECTIVES THAT ARE helpful entrées into the spiritual life of children.<sup>1</sup> What children tell us about their spiritual life is one way. The works of Robert Coles and David Heller are examples of this approach. Coles' research offers a wide basis for understanding the imaginative depth and breadth of children's spiritual life. He surveys children of Christian, Islamic, Jewish and secular religious backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> Heller's work, though not as comprehensive in scope as that of Coles, is a discussion of children's images of God and their provenance.<sup>3</sup>

Another way to approach faith development in children is through current theories. James Fowler<sup>4</sup> and John Westerhoff<sup>5</sup> represent two such theoretical posi-

<sup>1</sup>In this essay, the term children includes preschoolers through sixth-graders, roughly ages three through eleven (twelve). Seventh through twelfth grade is considered the range of adolescence. The phrase "educational ministry" refers to formal and informal relationships between these children and others in the congregation that foster teaching and learning the traditions of the faith and faithful living.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>David Heller, *The Children's God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986).

<sup>4</sup>James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), and *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury, 1976), and *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1980).

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tions. In their differences, these positions illustrate the range of human experience no single theory can possibly contain.

John Westerhoff says that faith is best understood as the perception or awareness of God's grace. Faith is given with human life. It is whole from the beginning, but that state of wholeness grows as a tree grows from a sapling to full size. Faith unfolds and is shaped through life experiences as a person grows. Thus, Westerhoff prefers to talk about faith development as a style or mode change.

James Fowler says that faith develops in stages that represent changes in the way one organizes the experiences of life into a reality that is coherent and meaningful. Fowler's image of faith development is one of building and reconstructing in the process of building.

Research data and theories are concerned with both the beliefs of faith and faithfulness as a way of life. Together, they offer a language for defining the content of faith development by interpreting children's descriptions of God as well as their journeys toward meaningful experiences. These definitions have been used in developing curricula and have become, like any curriculum, strategies for teaching and learning.

But to be effective, strategies must go beyond data and theories and give attention to the context and range of children's experiences in which teaching and learning take place. Faith development is neither something implanted, like an organ transplant, nor does it just grow, like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Faith development occurs through specific issues in concrete life settings. These issues provide still a third way to approach faith development.

This essay centers on this third approach as we turn now to four issues in the lives of children that afford opportunities for their journeys in faith to develop: children's play and work, questions for adults, educational ventures in classroom and enculturation learning, and aspects of congregational worship. In discussing these issues, we move from a whole-child perspective to a relational basis for teaching and learning, to the two main arenas for education in the congregation, and to the particular setting of congregational worship.

## II. ISSUES IN MINISTRY

### 1. *Play and work*

Each child develops into a unique person along patterns characteristic of a child's age level. It is, therefore, important for education to recognize and acknowledge both individual and general features of developmental differences. Moreover, children grow in six interrelated and interdependent areas of development: emotional, faith, mental, moral, physical, and social. Though one or another of these areas can predominate at different ages, all are present in some way as the child grows. No one area is finally more important than any other, and each influences all others. This means that Christian education's concern for faith development must always include the whole person and the interrelationships of all aspects of growth. What children experience about their physical growth or the emotional and social relationships stemming from that growth—the stuff of crea-

tion—inevitably affects what they are taught and what they learn about the traditions of faith and belief and the way of life together in the community of the church.

The way faith develops in this scenario of wholeness can be observed in the ways children play and work. These two activities are quite different and sometimes misconstrued by adults who tend to define them with reference to certain childhood behaviors and actions. Those behaviors that seem to go nowhere or to be inconsistent with something gainful are usually labelled play. When children take the world for what it's worth to them and interpret it through their own perspective, they play. When they do things out of trial and error in order to understand the world as it is from another's perspective, they work.

In the interrelationship of the areas of growth, faith development can be work or play. The task of the teacher is to recognize both and know when to encourage one or the other. The key here is to observe what children do and listen to what they say, giving attention to what they are communicating with their whole selves. Jean Piaget, the Swiss anthropologist whose theories of mental growth underlie much of the developmental research since his time, insisted on this method of research for understanding children.

As teachers begin to wonder about what's going on in a child's world, a comment with a question-tag might help ascertain what is observed. For example, "It seems that you are...,aren't you?" Feeling with the child and accepting the child's response are important. A question formulated on the basis of the child's attitude or remark can help adult and child clarify further what they have understood from each other. Questions about alternatives and consequences give children practice broadening the perspectives out of which they can develop problem-solving skills: "What else could you do?" or "How does that make you feel?" By using such questions in discipline situations involving children, a teacher can encourage conversation between the children that will help them solve their problem.

Teachers can learn more about children by checking their own observations against age-level characteristics in Sunday school curriculum materials and by discussing what they have learned with other teachers, parents, or other caregivers. Above all, teachers need to remember who they are as persons of faith. Faith development happens in the relationships between teacher and learner. It involves practice in working and playing.

## *2. Questions for adults*

Children learn words quickly by rote and repetition. They can repeat them, often in an appropriate context, with inflection and emotional overtones that give every reason for adults to think children know what the adults think the children are talking about. That simply isn't always the case. Language acquisition comes early. Understanding depends on later cognitive development. So, in a conversation with children, adults have to keep in mind, "What does the child mean?" not, "What is the child saying?"

This is especially important when children ask questions. Adults often hear them in a philosophical sense and begin thinking of answers they would find satisfying. But children's questions are practical questions. In their questions, children are looking for answers they can understand. Younger children center on the details of their experience. However far-reaching the content of their questions might seem, children are looking only for something to be said about the details in the questions. For example, if a young child questions, "Why did Jesus go away?" after hearing the story of Jesus' ascension, he or she is not expecting a statement about the incarnation or the parabola of grace, however simply attempted. The child is probably thinking about the separation of Jesus and the disciples and is looking for something like, "Jesus had to go away as we do sometimes. He will miss his friends as much as they will miss him."

Though older children can make connections between objects and events, their thinking, too, is concrete. Their questions are looking for concrete responses. Only by about eleven years of age are some children beginning to think abstractly. For example, when older children ask questions about crosses in the church building, answers can be built on the connection they can see between such crosses and Jesus' cross. Later, they will be able to connect the cross as a symbol with personal suffering.

It is not always easy to answer religious questions from a practical or concrete point of view. Adults sometimes feel pressed to give the "right and full" answer, at least as right and full as the best thinking and intuition can provide. "Who is God?" "Where is heaven?" "Can Jesus see and hear me?" "Why did Grandma die?" Adults want answers of commitment and conviction. Because of where they are in their development, children want answers that help them make sense of things now, like: "Someone who loves you." "Where God Lives." "Yes, and I think we miss Grandma a lot, don't we?" Children are made for answers like these. More developed answers can come as children grow. Questions of young children, in particular, are often just invitations to conversation. Behind the specifics adults see in children's questions is the unspoken "Talk with me about this."

Children's questions help them learn in three important ways. First, questions help them get more information about their world as they wonder about things and try to make sense of them: the "Why...?" questions. Second, questions are conversation pieces that help clarify what is being understood in the conversation: "What do you mean?" and "What about...?" questions. Third, questions help children to think. They are opportunities for children to broaden their perspectives, to look at what's going on around them in new ways, and to be challenged by experiences that haven't yet come together into concepts. No question is out of bounds.

Each type of question has its pitfalls and advantages. Questions that seek answers can turn teaching and learning into the worst of the catechetical method that is content with just memorized words. But, such questions can produce answers that become a framework or reference point for interpreting the world. Questions that drive toward clarity in a conversation can cause further confusion

by broadening the range of inquiry and attenuating the focus on understanding. But, such questions can help a child reorganize and reinterpret what was known previously. Questions, by encouraging thinking, can put faith claims at risk through doubt or rejection. But, such questions of risk can help a child discover the bedrock on which the journey in faith is traveled.

The positive side of each question is a way adults can help children learn how to learn. In the end, as children grow they come to understand better, not just know more. Teaching children *how* to think, as well as *what* to think, can provide them with a very important skill for managing belief and value systems. Maturity in faith comes with knowing how to believe and live within the community of faith for the sake of the world.

Ultimately, the catechetical method—the question and answer sequence—can be served by children’s questions for adults because the relationship between questions and answers can become an enriching dialogue in which each prods the other toward a greater grasp of reality.

### 3. Educational ventures

Christian education in congregations takes place in two main arenas: the classroom or other formal settings and the informal experiences of learning that come through being part of a community of faith. The three goals of teaching and learning—thinking, feeling, and acting—are achieved differently in each arena. In the classroom, these goals are achieved by some form of instruction associated with curriculum or other resources that provide the teacher with specific content to be communicated in an organized, systematic way. Learning by being part of a community of faith is a form of enculturation, a way of learning the belief systems, values, and lifestyles from day-to-day living within a given group. The focus in the classroom is more on learning *something* from someone else. The focus in enculturation is more on learning to be *like* someone else.

Though most congregations spend their time and effort providing forms of instructional learning for children in Sunday schools, vacation Bible schools, and the like, children also learn faith and faithfulness—or the lack of both—just by hanging around and taking in what’s going on in the lives of others. It is not a matter of one or the other, but a matter of conscious concern and intentional planning for both. Somewhere in both, everyone is a teacher and learner, and a resource for another person’s journey in faith.

Classroom learning sets forth the traditions that come from the past. It makes known the story of faith as others have struggled with it and known it in their lives. It makes the learner aware of who he or she is in the company of believers by looking at the faithful in the past. Enculturation is a way of discovering the faith by looking at the faithful with whom one lives in the present. The past gives us snapshots. The present gives us living models that remind us that faith can never just be given to someone. It must be lived with someone.

Together, classroom and enculturation learning help children grow as they live with the answers and the questions of faith. Sometimes answers are milestones

along the faith journeys of those in the past with which children can identify. Sometimes those journeys are the source of questions on the living edges of children's experience that continually shape the journey of faith today. Faith development is not only a report on what has been but also an openness to what is to be as the creation stuff of early life unfolds and grows in the community of believers.

A twofold process is at work in both classroom and enculturation learning. On the one hand, a teacher's job is to help the learner discover what is in herself or himself. Each person comes to the task of learning with significant experiences of making sense out of life, however those experiences have been shaped. Education, as the root of the word suggests, means "to lead out," to become aware, with the help of a teacher, of those experiences that give understanding and feeling to life and impel one toward action. On the other hand, the process of teaching and learning involves the transmission of the faith from generation to generation. We have been given the faith from our foreparents, and our job in Christian education in the congregation is to pass it on to those who will be the next generation.

Neither leading out nor passing on the faith is neutral. Each involves transformation under the guidance of God's Spirit. Transformation does not negate what comes from the past or call into question the personal journeys of faith people live today. It occurs when teacher and learner grow from each other's meaning-making in life. Here is where ministry *with* children comes full circle in the arenas of classroom and enculturation learning. Adults teach so that children can learn from them in order that they can learn from children. Transformation is the interpretive process alive in the unfolding of our faithful witness with each other in the present.

#### *4. Congregational worship*

Congregational worship is usually not planned as an experience for children. In basic form, liturgy is for adults. It does not fit easily into the child's world. Therein is a principle for making worship relevant for children: Start with their world, what is meaningful to them. Then look for ways to help children make connections with the world of adults.

Children are active people. Above all, they are curious. They like to move and see what is going on and feel they are wanted. They can get more out of worship when they are closer to the front of the nave during the service. Adults can instill a feeling of reverence for worship and an appreciation for children by being with their children there. If adult anxieties about children disrupting worship prevail, children quickly get the message that the worship service really isn't for them.

During the service, children can be encouraged to move their bodies in time with music. They can be encouraged to mimic adults in standing, sitting, and kneeling. They can learn simple responses such as "Lord, have mercy," or "Lord, hear our prayer." They can hum along if they can't read the words of a hymn. One congregation planned a "children's space" between the first pew and the chancel where small children could bring a favorite toy and sit on blankets with adults during the service. Some congregations have used children's bulletins that include

pictures and simple activities for older children to use during the service. Symbols around the church building can be the focus for discussions, especially with children seven years and older, before and after worship. Parents and other caregivers need help preparing children for worship. Books that interpret the parts of the liturgy in words and concepts children can understand are good additions to church libraries.<sup>6</sup> Worship with the congregation helps children learn who they are as individuals in God's family.

Some congregations ask adults to be surrogate grandparents who are with children regularly during worship. These relationships help develop positive attitudes toward worship and, in some congregations, have spawned friendships between families and broadened the social horizons of children.

The children's sermon has been the subject of much praise and criticism, and for a variety of reasons. Its critics say it is just a simplified version of what is to come for adults or that it is often developmentally inappropriate for children. Others see it as a valuable opportunity for children of all ages to have special recognition in worship with the pastor. Whether the subject of criticism or praise, children's sermons take a lot of preparation to be sure they are presented in the language and concepts children can understand. Young children are not able to understand abstract ideas and words. They also have difficulty understanding object lessons because they think concretely and cannot make adult connections between an object and what it is said to represent. For example, an adult may see an easy connection between a map and the Bible: each is a guide. If that connection is used to explain that the Bible is like a map that leads us through life, confusion arises in the young child. The Bible is a book, and a map is a map. Young children cannot understand when one is used to represent the other.<sup>7</sup> This difficulty is exacerbated when children of a wide range of ages are included in the children's sermon audience.

A way through the difficulties is to use concrete words and images, preferably in the form of a story, that children can listen to or dramatize, using story elements familiar to them from their own experiences. Once the story is told, stop, and let the children make their own connections with the story and discover what it means for them. One congregation used the children's sermon this way quite effectively by encouraging parents and other caregivers to talk about the sermon with children after worship.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

The best of educational ministry involving children is not for them or to them but *with* them. Children need guidance as they learn to live the faith and live to learn the faith. The challenge for congregations is to offer a partnership in this

<sup>6</sup>Gail Ramshaw, *Sunday Morning* (Chicago: Liturgy Training, 1993); Elizabeth J. Sandell, *Including Children in Worship: A Planning Guide for Congregations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991); and Sue Statler Velek, *My Worship Book* (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Art, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>Iris V. Cully, *Christian Child Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 118-119.

growing that God provides. It is a partnership carrying forward beliefs and images of God the creator. The foundation for educational ministry with children is first-article (creation) theology. The spirituality of children is their growth and development as whole persons. Their journeys in faith are formative and vital. Therefore, the goals of Christian education ought not be to help children grow up as quickly as possible or to bide the time of childhood. Honoring the fullness of children's growth is to honor the Creator God and the promises inherent in growing.

When Paul "put an end to childish ways" in adulthood, he did not argue for giving up on children (1 Cor 13:11b). Jesus went even further in claiming that adults can learn about God from children (Matt 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48). Knowing the God of childhood is the key for effective educational ministry with children.

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