

On Beyond Zebra

Beyond Traditional Models for Children's Ministry

By Amber Espinosa

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And I said, "You can stop, if you want, with the Z.
Because most people stop with the Z.
But not me!!!
In the places I go, there are things that I see
That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z.

--On Beyond Zebra by Dr. Seuss

Where are we now?

The alphabet, so to speak, for most children's ministry begins and ends with educational programs like Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. Educational programming is such a central part of church life in our culture that ninety-two percent of churches have a Sunday School program for children. Even people who are not otherwise involved in congregations will often make sure their children attend Sunday School. Educational programs are a cherished church tradition which seeks to pass the Christian faith on to the next generation.

At the same time, however the church is clearly being affected by our complex postmodern world of technology and globalization, a world marked by discontinuous change.ⁱ Attendance in mainline denominational churches has declined by more than 25% and in the past decade there has been a 22% drop in the percentage of adults attending mainline congregations who have children under the age of 18 living in their home.ⁱⁱ It is becoming clear that the programs and structures that were effective in the past are often inadequate for our changing world. This is an important time to take critical look at educational programming as the primary tool for children's ministry. Now is the time as Dr. Seuss would say, to look, "on beyond zebra" for new possibilities.

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How did we get here?

The first Sunday Schools began in the mid 18th century in England during the Industrial Revolution, as a way to teach moral values and prevent children from falling into crime. In the United States, Sunday Schools arose in conjunction with industrialization and served to educate children who often worked all week in mills and factories, or even on farms. Curriculum focused on learning to read, often using biblical texts, and then moved to catechesis. Teaching was done primarily through story-telling and memorization.

In the middle 18th century in America as Sunday Schools were taking root, theology was largely pietistic. Critical of the state church in England, American church leaders sought a truer form of Christianity. True Christianity happened, they believed through a dramatic conversion which resulted in a changed life. Moral behavior was evidence of the work of God in one’s life. Pastors of this time, like the famous Jonathan Edwards, used the threat of God’s wrath and the torments of hell to motivate conversion experiences. Christian education, taking root in this setting particularly emphasized moral behavior.

This focus on moral behavior, combined with the concept of original sin has at times in American history, produced Christian education at its worst; indoctrination enforced by punishment and fear of God’s wrath. Feminist theologians, among others, have criticized Christian theology for its connection to corporal punishment and even child abuse.ⁱⁱⁱ When children are understood to be innately sinful, discipline can be seen as a way to break the child’s will. The adult, in this view, is understood as God’s representative who demands unquestioning obedience and must use punishment when the child does not comply.

However widespread or rare the occurrences are, highly negative examples of Christian education have made their way into common thought. Whether from personal experience, or from the common lore, many people today hold negative opinions about Christian education. In *The Postmodern Life Cycle*, Fredrieich Schweitzer describes the fear of indoctrination that leads many parents to avoid religious education for their children:

Among today’s parents, many are not affiliated with any religious community, and among those that are, there also seems to be a fair number of people who are very hesitant to introduce their children to any particular religious tradition... Many of today’s parents associate religious education and nurture with authoritarian behavior, with

inculcating fixed beliefs, and with planting fears of punishment into the children’s hearts. The generation that has struggled to free itself from what was widely experienced as paternal or societal authoritarianism is more than eager to avoid whatever might resemble religious authority.^{iv}

Eager to avoid fear-based and authoritarian techniques, our culture has become much more child friendly. We even hold an idealized understanding of childhood as a carefree, playful time before adult responsibilities. We want our children to feel safe and secure, and we want them to be happy. In a society that is very achievement driven, we have a desire to cherish these times of freedom with our children. Disney’s 2011 theme, for example, is “magical moments.” The commercials show ecstatic children who have just been told that they’ll be going on a Disney vacation while the words scrolling across the screen say, “a few magic moments to last a lifetime.”

Alongside the change in our culture, Christian education has also become much more child friendly. In fact, church has become a place that we take children to protect them from the world. Christian schools serve as a safer, smaller alternative to large public schools. Instead of inspiring fear of God’s wrath, in most educational curriculum there is a strong emphasis on God’s love and God’s protection. The moralistic focus that comes from our historical roots is still alive and well, but it has taken on a much less shame-based approach. Instead, curriculum takes a softer focus on moral behavior in our relationships with others, characterized by the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Just as Christian education has moved away from shame and fear-based techniques, it has also moved from rote memorization to incorporate some of the most recent developments in educational practice. In rotational models and other popular curricula, children learn Bible stories through crafts, cooking, drama and technology. Activities are designed to be developmentally appropriate, to stimulate a variety of learning styles, and to introduce children to bible stories in a way that is fun and engaging. Children might learn the story of Noah’s Ark, for example, by hearing the story read aloud, by creating a stained glass rainbow, or by making animal shaped cookies. The message of the story would focus on God’s love and God’s protection, for Noah and his family. The story is repeated a number of times in a variety of formats so that the children will remember it.

How are we doing?

Educational programming is so embedded in church culture that we rarely take a critical look at how it’s working. We simply assume that children who have knowledge of the Bible stories will have faith and will grow up to lead Christian lives. However, in his book *Emerging Adulthood*, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett found no correlation whatsoever between childhood religious education and religious beliefs or practice in emerging adults:

In statistical analyses, there was no relationship between exposure to religious training in childhood and any aspect of their religious beliefs as emerging adults—not to their current classification as agnostic/atheist, theist, liberal believer, or conservative believer; not to their current attendance at religious services; not to their views of the importance of attending religious services, or the importance of their religious beliefs, or the importance of religion in their daily lives; not to their belief that God or a higher power guides their lives or to the certainty of their religious beliefs in emerging adulthood.^v

Certainly educational programming is not entirely to blame. In our post-modern world, we’re experiencing a global society in which we are exposed to an incredible variety of view points and belief systems. It is becoming clear in the United States that we are experiencing the end of “Christendom.”^{vi} Christianity is no longer the dominant religion. This is certainly a very complex issue that will not be solved simply programmatically, but it’s worth taking a look at how educational programming functions within this system.

According to the National Study of Youth and Religion, approximately 1/3 of high school youth are active in their congregations.^{vii} For many of those young people, and for many church leaders, Sunday School was a positive experience in which they became familiar with the Bible and experienced church community life. For the young people who remain in congregations, the Exemplary Youth Ministry study conducted through Luther Seminary shows that vibrant faith communities, parents and mentors help young people make the transition from childhood to mature Christian faith.^{viii} These young people, when they get into high school, make their Christian faith a priority and continue to be active in their faith communities.

While they may not be actively involved in congregations, most teens hold similar beliefs to those of their parents. Approximately sixty-seven percent of U.S. 12th graders report that

their religious beliefs are very similar or mostly similar to those of their parents.^{ix} Most identify themselves as Christians and hold positive or neutral opinions of the church. However, In *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, authors Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton characterize the faith of American teenagers as “moralistic therapeutic deism,” a set of beliefs that is not exclusive to any of the major world religions:

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.^x

When we take a look at educational programming until age 14, when the decline in church attendance typically begins, it’s easy to see how moralistic therapeutic deism happens. As we saw above, educational programming focuses on God’s love, God’s protection and the golden rule — the very themes of moralistic therapeutic deism. In an effort to meet children’s developmental needs, and to be sensitive to the sometimes harsh history of Christian education, we tend to oversimplify the biblical story and vastly underemphasize its radical nature.

Take the story of Noah for example. In a typical Sunday School lesson, children would learn about the rainbow, about the animals and be reassured of God’s love and protection. But this is a really provocative story that really brings to mind more questions than answers! Floods, after all, do still happen, not to mention hurricanes, tsunamis and tornadoes. Is God doing that because people are wicked? If my house gets hit by a tornado, does God love me? What kind of God would just wipe out almost the entire population of the world? Will God really keep me safe?

Even if doubts begin to surface, most teenagers hold similar religious views to those of their parents, and they tend to hold either positive or neutral opinions about the church. However, in *Emerging Adulthood*, Jeffrey Arnett describes emerging adulthood as a time when young people are developing a world view that is often very different than that of their parents:

Certainly there are cases where children grow up to hold the same beliefs as their parents, but such cases are too rare to show up in statistical analyses of groups, because it is much

more common for children to hold different beliefs from their parents by the time they reach emerging adulthood.^{xi}

Statistics from mainline churches reflect a similar trend. Young adults (25 or younger) are 6% of the national population; they are just one-third as many (2%) of all adults attending mainline churches.^{xii} In interviews with Arnett, emerging adults described their views of the church with statements like these:

I question the credibility of religion now... It doesn't make any sense.... For somebody to take that (the bible) literally and to call it a religion, to me that's just utterly ridiculous, completely ridiculous to take it as the only truth and totally close your mind to all other things. You make yourself stupid. ... I guess I had doubts of what's really true and what's not.... Wait a minute. These Catholics lied to me my whole life.^{xiii}

When we take a close look at popular educational curriculum, it's easy to see how a young adult might feel this way. In an effort to become more child-friendly, most Christian education programs are based on models for cognitive development. These developmental models focus primarily on skills that are present in most adults, but not yet present in children. Jean Piaget, one of the leading developmental theorists, for example, describes Pre-operational stage for children between the ages of two and seven, primarily in terms of what children are unable to do: they are egocentric, unable to take another person's point of view. The concrete operational stage, which spans approximately age seven to eleven is characterized by the ability to solve hands-on problems but not able to solve problems abstractly.

In 1981, James Fowler published *Stages of Faith*, a book which builds upon developmental theory to describe stages of faith development. Similar to Piaget, Fowler's description is based primarily on critical thinking skills that are present in adults, but not yet present in children. He describes faith in children from ages two to seven, “Seen from the cognitive developmental perspective the child's thinking is fluid and magical. It lacks deductive and inductive logic.”^{xiv}

Using these developmental theorists to form Christian educational curriculum has been an important part of making Christian education more child-friendly. However, this type of instruction treats children primarily as recipients of knowledge. In typical lessons, an individual Bible story is presented and interpreted for children, in a way that does not allow for any type of

critical thinking, and only very shallow life application. In *Welcoming Children*, Joyce Mercer describes the problems inherent in this type of instruction:

...learning consists in the acquisition of knowledge as data, and the kind of knowing educational theorists term “procedural knowing: or knowing how- is simply assumed to follow from knowing about.... the acquisition of knowledge understood as a simple habit or knowing how, which takes place as children have multiple opportunities to practice what they imitate in the actions of adults, without the need of any conceptual reflection on these actions.^{xv}

Children are seen as recipients of knowledge of Bible stories, but questions about the Bible or about faith itself are not addressed, and we incorrectly assume that knowledge about the Bible will automatically lead to children who know how to live a life of faith. With a group of 4th graders for example, I asked the children to tell me their questions about faith. The questions they asked were these: “Did God create dinosaurs? Did the flood really happen? Why do people act mean? How do people know the Bible is true? In a typical Sunday School curriculum, these questions are left unanswered. The Sunday School versions of Bible stories, because they provide simple answers to complex questions, do not connect with the real issues of life. One young man I interviewed said, “I know how many days Noah was on the ark, but no one ever asked me why (or if!) I believe in Jesus.”

Clearly, there is something missing from Christian education when it is based primarily on models of cognitive development in children. Faith is much more complex than simply knowing about the Bible stories. Children’s ministry as we know it, while a cherished tradition, is highly ineffective in producing actual lives of faith by the time people reach young adulthood. It is time to reexamine our models for faith development and children’s ministry programming. We need to think theologically about what’s really happening as children grow in faith.

Thinking Theologically About Development

James Loder from Princeton Theological Seminary has offered a new approach to understanding development theologically. In *The Logic of the Spirit*, Loder takes Eric Erikson’s stages of psychological development alongside the work of Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg and explores the theological dimensions of each stage of the life cycle. Loder argues that throughout human development, the human mind and spirit seek God in the mysteries of the created universe. The stage of trust versus mistrust in infancy, for example, reveals the human longing

for the face of God, which is the ultimate source of trust. Original sin then could be understood as a state of cosmic loneliness and anxiety that leads humanity to deny God and hide from God, and then to wander the earth ever in search of restored union with God.^{xvi} Through Christ, Loder describes how God opens Godself to be known to humanity:

.....there is an ultimate ground for the human spirit; it is not an accident doomed to wander aimlessly in the universe, endlessly crying out” Why?” in the still darkness of empty space. ..But it is the personal Author of the universe whose Spirit alone can set the human spirit free from its proclivity to self-inflation, self-doubt, self-absorption, ad self-destruction, and free for its “magnificent obsession” to participate in the Spirit of God and to know the mind of God.^{xvii}

Faith development when viewed theologically is much deeper than a cognitive model of development. Models of development used for Christian education must be able to describe the incredible mystery that humanity can know and be known by a God who is infinitely beyond our comprehension and yet present and active in the world. Faith development then, is not a hierarchy of thought, but a dynamic process--at times halting or misdirected and other times exploding. It is a process that does not just take place in the mind, but that encompasses the whole being.

Dr. Nancy Going of Luther Seminary argues that thinking theologically about development not only requires us to think theologically about traditional models of development, but to push beyond the boundaries of those models. Dr. Going uses her research with adolescents to show that there are particular theological themes that can be discerned and described by examining the faith energy of each phase of life. The goal is not to develop a hierarchy of ever-improving knowledge of God, but rather to describe the unique and valuable aspects of God that are revealed during each life stage.^{xviii}

For this project, I used a process similar to Dr. Going’s research in order to think beyond the boundaries of typical child development models. I used my own reflections as a teacher and a parent, and conducted some interviews with children, parents and grandparents. I found three theological themes emerging from the faith energy of children, and used those themes to create a frame for children’s ministry that goes beyond traditional models of Christian education.

Theological Themes that Emerge from the Faith Energy of Children

Childhood Wonder

In her memoir, *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard writes, “What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch--with an electric hiss and cry--this speckled mineral sphere, our present world.” This beautiful description captures the theme of wonder that emerged from my reflections and interviews about children. Experiencing the birth of a child and rediscovering the world alongside a child is an incredible experience that can bring us stunningly into the mystery of life, and the possibility of God.

In my interview with a grandmother, awe and wonder were evident as she described her grandson’s birth, “That was God’s moment for me..., in that birth, it was new birth, it was new life. I couldn’t even talk, and I love to talk! And I was exhausted from it. Peace came over me, and I was so tranquil that it was something that I couldn’t describe.” When she talked about her interactions with her grandson as a four-year old, she said, “It’s that innocence and newness of life. It’s just the beginning. It’s not something old. It’s something new every day and when I’m with him I cherish that.”

In *The Mystery of the Child*, Martin Marty describes the essence of each individual child that is in itself, beyond comprehension. As a unique child formed in the image of God, each child is a mystery that cannot be defined. Marty describes the analogy between the mystery of God and the mystery of the child:

The human, including the human child, is not infinite as God is, but still her existence cannot be reduced by science or definition. Were it not for “the analogy of relation,” the religious thinker as well as the provider of care would lack a language with which to connect the being or doing of the creator and the created child. In summary, it is to the point to being of the child, who henceforth occupies center stage, as a subject of wonder and as a wondering subject.^{xix}

Building a relationship of wonder with a child evokes a sense of awe and also a sense of joy. In one interview a father of a four-year old said, “I get to be a kid again. I get to play and remember everything again that you did when you were that age. Like playing toys and having sleepovers, and Halloween and Christmas and holidays and getting excited because they get excited. When they learn something new, it’s exciting because you get to see them grow and develop. They are discovering the world for the first time.” Martin Marty describes the sense of joy and playfulness inherent in the child, “Play itself is a natural expression of the mystery of the child, a sign of an enjoying child who inspires enjoyment among others.”^{xx}

Children are not only playful, but also innately curious about the world, and ask questions that can baffle adults. In one interview, the mother of a four-year-old reported that her daughter recently asked, “Mommy, what is life?” And the little girl wasn’t satisfied with the simple biological answer that it’s when our hearts beat and we breathe. Her mother realized this was a question about the meaning of life. The mother was so baffled by the question that she was greatly relieved when the conversation was interrupted, and she hoped the topic wouldn’t come up again!

Wondering about and wondering with a child brings us face to face with the ultimate questions of life. We are not only opened to the beauty and joy of life, but also the fragility of our lives in a vast universe. The tendency of adults, particularly in prosperous cultures and perhaps especially in Christian churches today, is to evade the subject of death, and to protect children from all potential harm. Martin Marty describes how wondering about and wondering with children can help us find healthier ways to deal with the fragility of life:

At least it has to cross the mind of any serious person that death is the robber of promise, even while one is watching two-year-olds frolic in abandon on the beach, chase butterflies, or mourn a dead cat...However those who offer help will not dispel the terror of death for the way it limits life, or abolish the threat of nonbeing that helps define the being of all... the one who regards the child as mystery and enters her world as much as possible with humility and imagination will find more appropriate and helpful ways to deal with finitude, through the exercise of empathy and imagination, play, storytelling, and much more. ^{xxi} (21)

In our American society, with our constant access to information and our drive to be successful, it is easy to become desensitized to the world around us. It is easy to stop wondering what our lives really mean. As adults, we become busy with the tasks of our everyday lives. We want to protect our children and make them happy and successful. We think children’s questions are cute, and we may write them down or give a pat answer, but rarely do we take those questions seriously.

However, childhood wonder is not just a lack of adult logic, as traditional developmental theory would suggest. When we think theologically about development, we realize that childhood wonder is an essential witness to the mystery of God. Children, then should not only be the recipients of adult teachings, but nurtured as they wonder, and invited into the center of congregational life. Martin Marty writes, “Explain the mysterious child? No, let her dance. Let

her evoke responses of wonder and move on refreshed for life in the practical and ordinary world.”^{xxii}

New Creation

The third aspect of childhood faith energy that emerged from my reflections and interviews is creativity. The common wisdom is that since children are less set in their ways than adults, they are more creative. Pablo Picasso is credited with saying, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” Because children can imagine different possibilities, they also have the potential to creatively solve problems in ways that adults cannot.

Brain research today echoes Picasso’s statement, finding that creativity is actually natural to the human brain, and can be fostered by creative activity. In an article for *Newsweek* in July 2010, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman summarize recent studies of creativity and brain function:

The new view is that creativity is part of normal brain function... Some scholars go further, arguing that lack of creativity—not having loads of it—is the real risk factor. University of New Mexico neuroscientist Rex Jung has concluded that those who diligently practice creative activities learn to recruit their brains’ creative networks quicker and better. A lifetime of consistent habits gradually changes the neurological pattern.^{xxiii}

Like childhood wonder, children’s creativity is more than just an accident, or a lack of adult reasoning. The creativity and imagination of children is analogous to the creativity of God. God is not a distant observer, detached from humanity, but is present and active even in the brokenness of the world around us. Peacocke describes God’s continuing creativity in his study of evolutionary theory and creation theology:

God has endowed the stuff of the world with creative potentialities which are successfully disclosed... God is experimenting and improvising in an open-ended process of continuing creation.^{xxiv}

Inspired by the hope that one day God will make all things new, we can stand in solidarity with those who suffer as a witness of God’s love for humanity. Jurgen Moltmann affirms the hope that we draw from Christ’s resurrection, hope that inspires us to action:

These forms given to hope are not imaginary wish-fulfillments... but essentially speaking these are expectations and hopes which release energies in all those who cherish them and make experiences possible because they ‘set people on the move.’ The expected ‘resurrection of the body’ is already present in the Spirit of the resurrection and is effective here and now. .. They are called to the liberation of suffering creation and are made alive for that purpose.^{xxv}

Rather than imagining that we can protect children from all the problems in the world, children’s ministry should be inspired by our hope for the new creation. Through children’s ministry, we can help children gradually face the harsh realities of this broken world and empower children to express their emotions in healthy and creative ways.

By engaging children in creative activities and real opportunities for creative problem solving, especially when we encourage divergent thought, we accomplish two important goals. We open ourselves to God’s creative work in the world, and at the same time, we increase children’s creative thinking abilities and the likelihood that they will continue to use creativity throughout their lives. We nurture their God-given ability to be co-creators of the future of humanity.

Where do we go from here?

Examining the theological themes that emerge from childhood faith energy gives children’s ministry a broader frame than a simple cognitive model. Children have a unique capacity to wonder and to illicit awe of the mystery of God. And yet, caring for children necessarily brings us to the end of ourselves and helps us to better understand the suffering love of God as a parent. Children have a unique capacity for creativity and imagination which reveals the creativity of God and makes them uniquely able to participate in God’s continuing creation. This unique faith energy of children reveals important aspects of God that are essential to a life of faith. As such, children need to be at the center of the church community.

Each congregation has a valuable story and has developed its own traditions over time. Each congregation, and each children’s ministry, is situated in a unique community, and has its own gifts and challenges. Rather than a specific program, I am offering a frame for ministry both *for* and *from* children that can be customized to a particular faith community. Developmentally appropriate instruction can still have a valuable place; however, I am offering a

frame for children’s ministry that emphasizes intergenerational relationships that will help children and adults grow in faith together.

Nurturing Childhood Wonder: Marveling at God’s Creation

Since childhood wonder brings us face to face with the mystery of God in the universe, marveling at God’s creation could be a powerful component of children’s ministry. The Search Institute’s “With Their Own Voices: A Global Exploration of How Today’s Young People Experience and Think About Spiritual Development” suggests a practical way to nurture childhood wonder. In the implications of the research, the Search Institute suggests, “Map your own neighborhood, village, or community for places that seem spiritual to you. Encourage friends and family to create their own maps, and compare them. Then spend time in those places.”^{xxvi}

Imagine taking a group of children and their parents on a hike around a neighborhood, or in a particularly beautiful place. Together, parents and children could find a place that they sense God’s presence. Imagine families reading a Psalm which marvels at the beauty of creation, and then writing a poem or a song, taking pictures or making a painting to express God’s presence in this particular place. Ernesto Cardenal writes:

The howl of nature is bursting with love, set in it by God who is love, to kindle the fire of love in us...And my body was also made for the love of God. Every cell in my body is a hymn to my creator and a declaration of love.^{xxvii}

Imagine worship in which the liturgy is just such a declaration of love to God. Imagine worship in which the liturgy is poetry written by families, with their photography and artwork projected on the screen!

When we think about God’s creation, we can’t escape the dismal reality that God’s very creation is facing dire circumstances today. While the level of the current effects and the future ramifications are debated, it is clear that we are living in an unsustainable lifestyle. Through consumerism, we are destroying the earth and making it less and less inhabitable.

Ministry to and from children, as a part of nurturing wonder, must focus on environmental care. Imagine children and adults together reading the creation accounts and

Psalms that marvel at God’s creation. Imagine spending several weeks researching, planning and committing to specific ways to live in harmony with our environment. This may be something as simple as recycling. Or, what if together the group came up with something different, something that impacted an entire church, company or community?

Nurturing Childhood Wonder: Playing Together

Playfulness is a natural expression of childhood wonder. In *Dangerous Wonder*, Mike Yaconelli takes up the deep meaning of play as a practical way of doing ministry. He writes, “Play is an expression of God’s presence in the world... Play is not an escape; it is the way to release the life-smothering grip of busyness, stress, and anxiety. Playfulness is a modern expression of hope, a celebration of the flickering light of the gospel...”^{xxviii}

Providing times for adults and children to play together would be a very simple way to do something very profound. Through reminding adults how to play, children can help them rediscover the joy of God’s creation. Through the very same activity, adults can be witness to God’s love for his children. Play does not have to be a separate component of children’s ministry, but playfulness can be a powerful part of every aspect of it. Imagine what could happen if we deliberately attended to playfulness in worship, in teaching and in parenting.

Nurturing Childhood Wonder: Inquiry-Based Teaching and Learning

One of the key tools that could be used to help nurture childhood wonder is inquiry-based instruction. In this approach, a child actively makes meaning out of the world around her, alongside of an adult who does not merely disseminate information, but rather guides the learning process. As apprentices of the Christian faith, children then would be encouraged to engage in conversations about faith and theology.

For example, my seven year-old, Carver, recently asked me, “Mommy, is God real?” Instead of simply giving an answer to his question, an inquiry-based approach would help him find the resources and formulate an answer to the question. Together, we could interview family members and church leaders. We could interview a person who is atheist or agnostic, and people of different faiths. We could read biblical accounts of God’s presence; the story of Moses for example. I could share my own faith story with Carver. We could pray together and seek to

serve our neighbor as God calls us, and reflect on our experience of God’s work. And through these experiences with God’s work in the world, Carver could begin to form his faith story.

In my urge to protect my child, I could instead, simply reassure Carver that God is real. However, my reassurance will come into question when he meets people of different faiths, or when he gets older and begins to think more critically about my beliefs. Take for another example, the story of Noah. If I tell Carver that this story means God loves him and promises never to flood the world again, he’ll probably accept my meaning now. Later though, when a natural disaster strikes, what is he to think? If instead, I have taught him how to ask questions and a process for forming his own answers, he will be ready for new questions that emerge. Inquiry-based instruction could be an incredibly powerful, ongoing process within families, and it is a process that will serve children well even into adulthood.

Nurturing Childhood Wonder: Spiritual Practices

Children have a unique capacity to wonder about God. As they grow, children are also learning language and habits that they will use throughout their lives. Rather than focusing primarily on educational programming, by helping children learn spiritual practices, we can nurture their ability to wonder in the very presence of God.

In *Welcoming Children*, for example, Joyce Mercer argues that children need to be involved in worship and other practices of the church in order to truly learn what faith means.^{xxix} And we adults can learn too. Imagine how much more exciting worship could be if we all learned to worship like children, rather than insisting that they worship like adults. Milestone Ministries and Faith Inkubators’ Stepping Stones both aim at helping parents celebrate moments of God’s presence with their children, and to engage in spiritual practices in daily life. Through spiritual practices, children and adults alike can take a step back from the busy, ordinary world and can be renewed in their relationships with God and one another.

New Creation: Creativity and Problem Solving

Because they are able to imagine a variety of possibilities, children have a unique capacity for creative problem solving. As such, children are called to be part of God’s continuing creation in world. The tendency in prosperous cultures is to protect children from the

harsh realities of the world. However, particularly in a wealthy consumerist society, it is important for children’s ministry to offer an alternative to perpetual consumption. Joyce Mercer describes the role of faith in constructing alternative narratives by which to live:

Children in North America simultaneously manifest their particular vulnerability to the powers of the consumerist empire and become complicit in its perpetuation in ways that then bring harm to others. (Harm comes most notably to children and others in the Two-Thirds World whose labors fuel the consumptive machine of North American appetites for commodities.) ... It calls for Christians to take seriously the reality and power of sin in the world and in our lives. We must notice our participation with it and engage in constructing different narratives by which to live...^{xxx}

Children are called to participate in God’s live-giving work in the world. Children’s ministry has a responsibility to help children feel empathy toward those who suffer in the world, and to empower children to use their God-given gifts of creativity and problem solving in service to those in need.

New Creation: Constructing Meaning through Story

In typical educational programming, there is an emphasis on rote recall of the story, along with a simple moralistic lesson. The Biblical story should have a much more important role in constructing a narrative for children’s lives. *In The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in Classrooms and Community*, a text written for elementary school teachers, Dyson and Genishi write, “Stories are an important tool for proclaiming ourselves as cultural beings. In narratives, our voices echo those of others in the sociocultural world... Thus in sharing stories, we have the potential for forging new relationships... individual lives are woven together through the stuff of stories.”^{xxxix}

Rather than oversimplifying the biblical story, current teaching methods can help children and adults discuss the stories together. By using open-ended questions and teaching children tools for reading the Bible, we can help children find themselves in the stories. We can help them to hear God’s voice in the text, and to and to be in relationship with God through the text. In typical children’s ministry, children are exposed to many stories within the Bible, but never the biblical story as a whole. In order to find themselves within the story of the Bible, children need to understand the plot of God’s interaction with the world through by learning the key stories in relation to the whole.

In conversation with the biblical story, we can help children express the stories of God’s work in their own lives. In *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer describes his journey toward finding his true gifts in his life’s work. Palmer believes that as children, we naturally live our gifts through the types of play and activities that we choose. Gradually, in the search for what society calls a successful life, we are socialized away from our true gifts, and many people find a great deal of dissatisfaction with their work lives. In *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer describes a great gift that he has given his grandchildren. Each year of their young lives, he has recorded the strengths that he sees in them, and he hopes they will be able make their life choices according to their strengths.^{xxxii}

Imagine a church where parents and other adults, instead of giving moral lessons and empty praise, regularly share strength stories with their children and help them find words to describe their strengths. In doing so, the adults are helping their children find their true giftedness bestowed by God, and helping them discern God’s calling in their lives. At the same time, adults can remain open to God’s calling in their own lives.

Children’s Ministry: A Continuing Creation

Children’s ministry has all too often been understood as a static model or curriculum that can be adopted and repeated year after year. Certainly any activity that involves children needs careful planning. If we understand God to be continually at work in the lives of individual children, however, children’s ministry also needs to be flexible enough to discern and nurture the movement of the Spirit.

When I offer this frame for children’s ministry, I am not suggesting that churches adopt a program with a separate component for each aspect of the frame...playtime shouldn’t happen just on the third Saturday of every month. Instead, the aspects of this frame complement each other and work together in organic ways. Like a skilled gardener, a leader of children’s ministry must make a careful plan for planting seeds, but then the gardener must be ready for changing weather or soil conditions and must have the ability to prune and nurture each plant.

One Sunday, walking through the halls of a suburban church and school where I work, I saw a poster that said, “Kids Helping Kids: Help us build a well in Tanzania. The well will cost

approximately \$3,000. That’s only \$130 for each school family, and even less with the help of the church community. Donations Humbly Accepted.”

The story of this Kids Helping Kids^{xxxiii} project is a wonderful example of the combination of careful planning and nurturing that makes a vibrant children’s ministry. Over the summer, one of the children’s ministry leaders had visited a sister church in Tanzania. Throughout the year, the children had been learning about Africa. They were amazed as they researched and created projects about the incredible environment and animal life in Africa. The children learned the names of cities in Tanzania and saw pictures of the leader’s trip to Tanzania. The children read and discussed Jesus’ parables. They sang traditional African songs and saw a performance of traditional African dance. The children exchanged letters with students in Tanzania, and prayed for their pen-pals during chapel services. All careful seeds planted.

Then, the work of the Spirit took on a life of its own. After learning about the lack of available drinking water, the second grade class decided that they would like to help build a well near their sister church in Tanzania. The children did the math, created and hung the signs all around the building. Then, the fifth grade class decided to design and sell t-shirts to help with the fundraising efforts. A parent had a connection to a local band, which did a benefit performance, an event that brought the entire community together for a night of fun.

In this project, the themes of childhood wonder, God as a suffering parent, and new creation are evident. The children wondered about creation reached out in care for others who suffer, used their creativity and individual gifts to make a difference, and the whole community was inspired to playfully participate. The children’s ministry leaders planted careful seeds, and the children themselves took the lead and brought God’s story and the children’s stories to life. It makes an important point about the future of the church in a changing world. Who better than the children themselves to lead churches, “on beyond zebra” into a future ripe with possibilities?

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End Notes

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