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Making Room: A Place for Children's Spirituality in the Christian Church

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Abstract

A relatively uncharted territory until recently, the concept of children as innate spiritual beings has garnered significant attention among scholars over the past two decades. Seminal studies by researchers provide practitioners with the opportunity to gain a deeper appreciation of the spirituality of children and their ability to seek and contemplate spiritual concepts (Ratcliff, 2007). The more that is learned about children's spirituality, the more apparent it becomes that the Christian church in the United States generally fails to provide sufficient space for children to explore, develop, and share their spirituality. This potentially leads children to suppress or disconnect from their spirituality in later years and also deprives a Christian community of the ability to learn and grow from children's unique experiences of God and spirituality. This paper examines the underlying theories that foster environments among Christian churches, where the ennoblement of a "grown-up faith", and the resulting power adults hold because of that, inhibit the ability for children to be regarded and approached as capable of spiritual and faithful beliefs and understanding, apart from adult intervention.

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"I was feeling real scare, real upset…and I got so scared I started crying, and then all of a sudden, I saw the door open, and there was a flash of light outside; it was like lightening, and I think it was Jesus. He'd come to help me" - *9 year old girl describing a dream from* (Coles, 1990, p. 131)

"At night, a lot, I'll be looking out the window, and it's real quiet, and you can sit and wonder if there are people like you up on other planets or stars; and you can wonder whether there is a God watching you—or maybe there are several gods, or lots of them, or angels, I don't know, but I think about it, and how it's not fair…that you and I are healthy, and others, your brothers aren't."- *12 year old boy, Norman* (Coles, 1990, p. 298).

These excerpts from Robert Coles' (1990) book, *The Spiritual Life of Children* provide the reader with a glimpse into the intricate inner lives of these children. Coles' research (1990), well regarded as seminal work in the field of children's spirituality, offers important insight into the spiritual capacities of children. An overlooked treasure of the book comes in the personal commentary that Coles provides. He intertwines the children's words with his own struggles of when and how to respond and their conversations often elicit memories from his childhood or spiritual questions Coles personally wrestles with.

Coles models a way for adults to listen to children and allow them the space to express their inner spiritual lives and wrestle with deep existential questions. He also provides a picture of the potential children have for impacting adult's spiritual lives. Many of the adults who are part of the children's lives also have a voice in this book - the parents, Sunday school teachers, nuns, Priests, and others, who are often referred to when children share their thoughts and have evidently influenced the spiritual lives of the children, some in positive ways and some in more negative ways.

Coles' work is one in a growing body of literature where the concept of children as innate spiritual beings is garnering significant attention among scholars. Researchers such as Robert

Coles (1990), David Hay and Rebecca Nye (2006), Tobin Hart (2006), and Brendan Hyde (2008) provide practitioners with the opportunity to gain a deeper appreciation of the spirituality of children and their ability to seek and contemplate spiritual concepts (Ratcliff, 2007). This empirical research has served as a foundation for theorists to develop guides for practitioners to understand how to better nurture the spiritual lives of children (Allen & Ross, 2012; Beckwith, 2004; Csinos, Jennings, McClaren, & Yust, 2002; Nye, 2011). Unfortunately, the Christian church in the United States, in general, appears to be slow in embracing this new understanding of children as spiritual beings. This paper seeks to address possible barriers that hinder the church from transitioning to a more holistic approach to ministry with children.

Definitions

An overview of the literature reveals the complex and intricate spiritual lives of children, which indicates that a simple definition does not adequately encapsulate the multifaceted nature of children's spirituality (Hyde, 1998). A holistic understanding of children's spirituality will honor the varied voices that provide insight into this delicate dimension of human life (Ratcliff & May, 2004). Roehlkepartain (2004) states "[I]t seems premature—and potentially counterproductive—to propose that a particular definition could adequately capture the richness, complexity, and multidimensional nature of this domain of human life" (p. 121).

Empirical research designed to investigate children's spirituality has primarily focused on the nature of spirituality in children describing children's ability for "spiritual processing" (Nye, 2004, p. 90). Nye (2004) writes:

"It turns out that children, partly by virtue of their distinctive psychological

characteristics, have an intriguing rich capacity for spirituality, for a kind of religious

knowing and being which is neither contingent on their religious knowledge nor moral

accountability" (p. 93).

The following brief overview of literature on children's spirituality provides an account of the

spiritual lives of children as described by scholars in the field.

In his book previously referred to, *The Spiritual Life of the Child,* child psychiatrist

Robert Coles (1990) outlines findings from interviews with 500 children, between 6 and 13 years

of age, from all over the world and varied religious backgrounds. Through extensive descriptions

of interactions with several of these children, the reader is provided with an intimate look into

the inner lives of the children who share deeply meaningful life stories and wrestle with

spirituality, faith, the afterlife, and God or Allah. Coles explores the dynamic inner lives of

children as a source of significant meaning for each child. He is cautious in making large

generalizations based on his interpretation of the children's experiences; however, Coles

recognizes children as "seekers" or "young pilgrims, well aware that life is a finite journey" who

are eager to make sense of it (p. xvi). Coles noticed an overlap in children's religious and

spiritual lives, and observed children critically analyzing organized religion (p. xvii). He writes

that his focus wasn't on children as students of religion, but as sentient beings who are "profane

as can be one minute, but the next, spiritual" (p. xvii).

Hay and Nye (2006) developed a theoretical perspective of children's spirituality based

on conversations with 6 through 11 year olds from two state schools in England. They began

their research with a map of spiritual sensitivity in three domains: awareness sensing, mystery

sensing, and value sensing, to provide an initial "something to look for" in the transcripts (Hay &

Nye, 2006, Chapter 4). Using a grounded theory approach to analyze the interview data, Nye

developed the construct "relational consciousness" (Chapter 8). "In brief, children's spirituality

was recognized by a distinctive property of mental activity profound and intricate enough to be termed 'consciousness', and remarkable for its confinement in a broadly relationship, inter- and intro-personal domain." (Chapter 7, Introduction, para. 3). They found the relational aspect of spirituality in the children they interviewed in the children's awareness of their connectedness with self, others, God, and the world. As Nye asserts, the "relational consciousness" possessed by the children illustrates how spirituality is lived out as innate and integral to a child's very being (Hay & Nye, 2006; Nye, 2011) conceptualizes children's Christian spirituality as "like a child" in that it is sometimes nonconforming, pervading all aspects of life, fleeting, and vulnerable (Chapter 1, What is children's spirituality section, para. 3). She adds, a child's spirituality is not always easy to identify because children from Christian backgrounds do not rely primarily on explicit Christian language or images to describe their spirituality.

Hyde (2005) used hermeneutic phenomenological reflection on transcripts from interviews and observations with 8 and 10-year-olds from Catholic primary schools in Australia to explore their spirituality. From this research he identified four characteristics of children's spirituality: "felt sense, integrating awareness, weaving the threads of meaning, and spiritual questing" (p. 150). Hyde describes felt sense as a "physical bodily awareness", where children draw on their physical experiences for knowledge (p. 156). Integrating awareness entails what Hyde calls "a second wave of consciousness" observed as free-flowing conversation which develops soon after the "initial level of consciousness" or particular focus on a tactile activity (p. 159). Hyde found that children used wondering as a tool to weave threads of meaning in response to stimuli or conversation starters (p. 159). Spiritual questing is the child's "searching for authentic ways in which to relate with Self and Other" (p. 177).

Descriptions of children's spirituality based on the research by Coles (1990), Hay and Nye (2006), and Hyde (2005) provide a framework for exploring how children act as agents and participants in their spiritual lives, while acknowledging the adult's role in providing wisdom and guidance to the child's experience.

Children as Spiritual Agents

In November 1989 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). The CRC, made up of 54 articles, is a legally binding document addressing how to provide children with the rights afforded to them (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). The development of the CRC supports the emerging understanding of children as valued participants in their families and communities (Hart, 1992). The view of children as active agents in shaping their own development is garnering attention in literature from various fields including sociology, psychology, education, and theology (James & James, 2001). This literature includes an exploration of how the perception of children as active agents will shape and change future approaches to the treatment of children (James & James, 2001).

The understanding of children as innate spiritual beings is further solidified when children are thought of as active participants in their own spirituality, instead of passive recipients of knowledge about God (Hyde, Yust, & Ota, 2010). As seen in conversations children had with Coles (1990), adults like parents, nuns, teachers, and priests, have a significant influence on children's religious understanding. The power dynamics between adults and children in the Christian church in the United States should be explored and addressed to provide children with more active participation in their experience in the church and programs designed to nurture their spirituality. In order to provide a beginning point for moving forward, it is

proposed that the following four aspects of the Christian church in the United States are barriers to creating a holistic environment for the nurture of children's spirituality: ennoblement of adult faith, reliance on content acquisition, token opportunities for children's participation, and adultism.

<div align="center">**Barriers to Nurturing Children's Spirituality**</div>

Barrier One: Ennoblement of Adult Faith

Developmental stage theories, formulated by Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler, and others, dominated literature in the twentieth century, on children's faith formation and provided the central framework for many Sunday school curricula and models of children's Christian education (Estep & Beckenridge, 2004; Hay, Nye, & Murphy, 1996; Miller-McLemore, 2010; Ward, 1995). A child's ability to grasp faith is often seen through a developmental stage theory lens, leading to the inference that children are incapable of "genuine spirituality" until adolescence or adulthood when they are understood to have the capacity for meaningful reflection and abstract thinking (Hart, 2006, p. 163). Hay, Nye & Murphy (1996) suggest that:

> "Over the past thirty years the dominance of cognitive development theory in the field of religious education has led to a severe neglect of the study of spirituality of the child and to a distortion of what goes on in the religious education classroom" (P. 47)

Developmental stage theories, particularly James Fowler's (1981) faith stages theory, have provided positive guidance for leaders in children's Christian formation particularly in the development of age appropriate opportunities for children in the church (Dettoni & Wilhoit, 2002). Fowler is clear that the faith stages are not an "achievement scale" or a representation of "educational or therapeutic goals" (p. 114). He invites his readers to "playful seriousness and serious playfulness" (p. xiv.) noting that his theory only provides one piece of the larger story of

human faith. However, an in-depth look at practices developed in the church based on Fowler's stages of faith, indicates that there has been over reliance on this one theory. This limits the perception of children as spiritual beings by elevating the "final frame" of adult faith (Miller-McLemore, 2010).

The adoption of developmental stage theories as a primary framework for guiding practice with children in the Christian church often leads to the ennoblement of adult faith over the child's faith. From this perspective adults have an element of "expert power" (French & Raven, 1959) because the adult is seen as having a "special knowledge or expertness" (p. 263). This power can be seen in adult-children relationships where the interactions are "adult-centered" and form a "one-way flow of communication" (Haight, 2004, p. 109). In settings where grown-up faith is valued as the arbitrary ultimate goal children's questions, speculations, and thoughts are often discouraged or ignored (Haight, 2004; Yust, 2002). The limited view of children's capacity to think spirituality, derived from developmental stage theories, can lead to the elevating of adult faith as the ultimate goal, leaving little room to embrace children as valuable participants in their own spiritualty and in the spirituality of the community.

Barrier Two: Reliance on Content Acquisition

According to Haight (2004) much of the research in children's religion and spirituality has focused on cognition "which involves thinking, concepts and religious knowledge, such as a children's knowledge of the Gospels and changing ability to interpret Jesus' parables" (p. 112). This is confirmed in marketing from major publishers of curricula for Sunday school in the United States. For example, Discipleland (2013) describes the value in their curriculum:

"The Bible illumines a finite number of 'must know' topics to understand, 'must be' traits to exhibit, and 'must do' activities to experience. When a child's developmental

process includes that knowledge, those traits, and those experiences, we can be

reasonably assured that we have done our part to develop a lifelong disciple of Jesus

Christ."

On Gospel Light's (2013) website it states their Sunday school program "is the best choice for

life-changing Bible teaching."

In her *Faith Formation in Children's Ministries* project, Karen-Marie Yust (2002)

observed a strong emphasis on knowledge acquisition for children in the churches she observed.

She writes that children are typically seen as "vessels" needed to be filled with information in

order to gain faith rather than understood as capable of their own faith (Yust, 2002, p. 4).

Children don't truly "belong" to the church as active participants but rather as passive recipients

of educational programs (Yust, 2002, p. 4). Yust (2002) described several situations where she

observed teacher's as "uncomfortable" when children began talking about their every day lives

as it "distracts" from the lesson for the day (p. 8). She also describes incidents where students

opened the door for meaningful conversations around significant topics where the teachers

ignored the student's inquiries by not addressing them or changing the topic to seemingly get

them back to the important points of the lesson. It appeared as though the teachers had an agenda

with little room for straying from that agenda to focus on the children's wonderings, questions,

or thoughts (Yust, 2002, p. 8-9).

Nye (2004) asserts that children's natural ability to process their spirituality has "been

neglected by Christian communities, whose concern has been installing spiritual comprehension

software to the awkward hardware with which children are equipped" (p. 90). She suggests the

focus on growing religious knowledge may stifle children's innate ability for spiritual "knowing

and being" (2004, p. 93). This focus on acquisition of Biblical knowledge impacts the way adults

respond to children's natural wonderings. When children inevitably ask questions or point out

contradictions in the text or the lesson, adults are often quick to offer counter-arguments to

explain in rational terms what they want to children to believe (Nye, 2004, p. 99).

The emphasis on knowledge acquisition presents several problems when it comes to

creating space for the nurture of children's spirituality in the church. Most programs for children

in the church are centered on a once a week educational opportunity that lasts around an hour

and is often led by volunteer teachers who are there two or three times a month. When the

primary goal for a program is content acquisition, and the program is so limited in time and

resources, there is little room for children to engage in opportunities for wonder and reflection on

the material. Yust (2002) writes:

> "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" (p. 4).

The reliance in the Christian church on words to help children understand the Christian faith, can

potentially "diminish a child's wonder" (May & Ratcliff, 2004, p. 161).

Ruppell (2004) writes that children's Sunday school classes are often based on "Adult's

arbitrary concept about what children should be doing rather than on the children's real needs"

(p. 344). The focus on knowledge acquisition and adult desires to get their lessons across or have

children adopt a certain set of beliefs, appears to be limiting the opportunity for the nurture of

important aspects of children's spirituality including a wondering, awe-sensing, and questioning.

Barrier Three: Token Opportunities for Participation

Hart (1992) describes tokenism as "those instances in which children are apparently

given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject…and little or no opportunity

to formulate their own opinions (p. 9). Recently developed practices in children's programming

in the Christian church adopted as an attempt to develop a more child-centered approach, offer a

"token" approach to children's participation in their own spiritual growth. Those trends include

entertainment-based programs, limited opportunities for participation, and the separation of

children's from adult worship.

        Entertainment based programs. In the 1990's many church leaders adopted the notion

that church should be the most fun experience in a child's week (May, Posterski, Stonehouse &

Cannell, 2005). May et al., call this approach to ministry the "carnival model" where children

experience an atmosphere similar to Chuck E. Cheese or a McDonalds playhouse. In this

entertainment based space children are encapsulated with bright colors, elaborate sets, funny

skits, flashy media, loud music, and energetic games. While this approach is not inherently bad,

it may not provide the necessary space to nurture the spirituality of many children. As May et al.

state some children "may feel overwhelmed or lost in such a setting" which "may make it

difficult for children to experience awe and wonder (p. 16).

        Bellous and Csinos (2009) conducted a qualitative research study with 13 children from

Christian churches in Ontario. They describe one boy Caleb, who attended a church with an

"upbeat" Sunday program for children (p. 222). Caleb talks about his intimate connection with

God, particularly when he is outside, and his dedication to scripture reading at home. Bellous and

Csinos describe Caleb as feeling annoyed, frustrated, and disconnected from the children's

programming at his church as exemplified in his statement "I feel like they're saying that there

are not mysteries of [God]…when I know there are" (Bellous & Csinos, 2009, p. 222). Caleb's

story provides a different voice of a child needing quiet, reflective opportunities, among the

many loud voices that focus on the need for children to be entertained, busy, and have fun.

Thomas (2009) found that the children's pastors she interviewed in her research in Christian churches in the Houston area had "mixed-feelings" about entertainment-based programs, noting the lack of silence and "documented spiritual benefits" as concerns (p. 68). This type of programming is based on a limited assumption of children and their spiritual needs. Illusive anecdotal measurements of success such as, the number of participants or the energy level of the children, make this approach deceitfully appealing and difficult to overcome in the light of new research on children's spirituality.

Children's worship. Children's church is a popular method for engaging children in worship opportunities apart from the regular adult worship service. In this model two, age segregated worship services happen at one time, with adults and children separated for their own worship experiences. This model is built on the assumption that children need to learn to worship in their own age appropriate way while they are young. Yust (2002) quotes a colleague of hers saying "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" (p. 12).

There are other approaches to worship where children are invited to participate in the adult worship service, however these are often token opportunities for participation. Children are treated as passive recipients to learn versus active participants in worship (Mercer, 2005.) In some cases congregational members want to see the children in worship because they are valued more as a "symbol of vitality" for the congregation, rather than active participants in the faith community, demonstrated in the "uncritical and casual" way children are invited to actively engage (Mercer, 2005, p. 214) Their active engagement is typically limited to opportunities to

sing in a children's choir or to go to the front of the church for a children's sermon. Ng and

Thomas (1985) wrote about practices such as children's sermons and children's choirs as

"discriminatory" practices that further compartmentalized children's experiences in the churches,

relegating their participation to special age-segregated practices. For many, these practices may

appear to be ideal models for involving children in the Christian church. However, assessment of

these models guided by empirically based descriptions of children's spirituality and the view of

children as spiritual agents, can bring to light deficiencies in these approaches.

Barrier 4: Adultism

A final barrier to developing better practices for nurturing children's spirituality is seen in

the priority of adult needs. This is perhaps the most limiting of all the barriers. The priority

placed on the needs of adults can be seen in various practices in the Christian community

primarily in worship. Dillen (2007) "criticizes the lack of sensitivity to the participation of

children in our society" (p. 43) using the term adultism to describe situations when "the work of

adults is generally seen as more important than the play of children" (p. 42). Miller-McLemore

(2003) uses the term adultism to describe anything that diminishes the rights of children. There

are aspects of adultism in the Christian church that limit the experiences afforded to children in

the church.

Children in worship. Participation in the worship life of the congregation is found to

have a positive influence on children's spiritual development and is considered by many scholars

to be a "best practice" in the nurture of children's spirituality (Roeklkepartain & Patel, 2006;

Beckwith, 2004; Thompson, 2009; Allen & Ross, 2012; Miller-McLemore, 2006; Bunge, 2009).

Despite a significant amount of literature focused on the importance of children's participation in

the corporate worship of the entire church, the trend to pull children out of worship continues

(Campagnola, 2004). Campagnola asserts that children are perceived as distractions to the worship of the congregation as seen in the "[i]ncreasing movement in our churches to separate the children from the adults for their own worship and teaching, and to protect the so-called 'intimacy' of the worship and teaching of adults" (Campagnola, 2004, p. 73). Mercer (2005) notes other typical reasons for not including children in the regular worship life of the community including the complaint that the liturgy or sermon would have to be altered to be age-appropriate or that children will be bored and restless. Adults will "mask" their desire to remove children from the community because it is too "messy" and "complicated" by the rhetoric that their true concern is the developmental needs of the children (Mercer, 2005, p. 189). The elevation of adult's needs over children's needs is seen in areas beyond worship, even those areas designed specifically for children, such as Sunday school.

Sunday school volunteers. In her dissertation, Thomson (2009) interviewed 20 children's pastors from a diverse group of churches in the Houston area, to explore what criteria churches use in determining their Sunday school curriculum. Through the connections with various pastors, Thomson discovered the primary criteria for choosing Sunday morning curricula is ease of use for the teacher (p. 66). In her conversation with a pastor in one of the congregations, Thomas (2009) was told that it was difficult to get volunteers to work with the youngest children because of the amount of energy it took to care for the children. While this was a small study in a specific area of the country, it raises questions about motivations behind curriculum decisions. As Thomson suggested, this study can provide a framework for further research that investigates motivations behind materials used in Christian education with children and further investigate how those materials and programs nurture children's spirituality. Furthermore, the difficultly in finding volunteers to commit to leading children's programs raises

questions about the lack of concern for the needs of the children over individual adult needs.

Future Directions

Despite these and other barriers to adopting practices in the Christian church to better

nurture children's spirituality there are several movements in the right direction. One of those is

Jerome Berryman's (1995) curriculum *Godly Play,* a Montessori based approach to Christian

education that allows children time to wonder and experience God. It is developed from Sofia

Cavaletti's (2002) work developing Montessori based Christian education, and Berryman and

Stewarts (1989) *Young Children and Worship.* Godly play has been adopted as the Sunday

school curriculum by many churches in the United States, wide used by many Episcopal

churches (Hadaway, 2005), but also increasingly used in various Christian denominations all

over the world.

There is also work to develop a more comprehensive view of children in the church by

inviting the influence from other theories beyond developmental stage theories. Estep and

Breckenridge (2004) propose the use of the ecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner

(1979) as a framework for the formation of children's spirituality. "The awareness of the

ecological interconnectedness of human systems with one another can constitute a fundamental

shift that views spiritual formation as embracing the totality of humane existence" (p. 333). Hood

(2004) performed a qualitative research study on children in Christian churches using the

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development as a guide. She describes children as being

shaped in the congregation not only by experiences in programs they attend, but also by their

comprehensive experience in the congregation. This provides an approach to broaden the view of

children as participants not just in programs designed for them, but also in the larger social

settings, such as congregational practices.

Situated learning theory developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) is also being recognized as a valuable guide for viewing the nature of children as learners in the church (Allen, 2009; Mercer, 2005). This theory is grounded in the notion that "learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 31). Learners are considered "legitimate peripheral participants" in a community of practice, where they learn and develop through full participation in the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Some scholars are investigating the potential that the view of children as legitimate peripheral participants in a community of faith can have in shaping more holistic environments for nurturing children's spirituality (Allen, 2009; Mercer, 2005). Mercer (2005) asserts that children can be approached as "genuine apprentices of Christian faith and life" by being given opportunities to be legitimate participants in the core practices of the faith community (p. 201).

Conclusion

While these are steps in the right direction, the development of various curricular models as well as the influence of a few scholars embracing other theoretical frameworks, are not sufficient enough to support the fundamental shift needed for Christian churches to truly provide room to nurture the spirituality of children. The growing body of literature around children's spirituality and the rights of children and agents and participants in their own social contexts should continue to provide a guide to better understand children as spiritual agents. There should be more attention paid to identifying the fundamental barriers that halt changes toward providing the spiritual opportunities children thrive under in the church and investigating how to break down those barriers.

While at times it seems like a daunting task to break down institutional barriers that keep children as passive recipients versus active participants in their spirituality, it is an important one.

The work of Robert Coles (1990) in *The Spiritual Life of Children* is a reminder of the value in taking on that task. We see the potential that children have for an inspiring level of depth in their ability to grasp and wrestle with spiritual issues. As Robert Coles so aptly models for adults, not only do children need opportunities to work out their spiritual wonderings, but adults can benefit greatly by listening and learning from the unique insights children have as fellow pilgrims on the spiritual journey.

Heather, this was all so wonderfully written! It was an easy and intriguing read for sure. I added and took a way a few commas here and there…feel free to accept or deny these as you want! My only other question was about the page citations. In the format you are using is it necessary to cite the year the book was written? And then for page numbers, is it (authors last name, page number) without the p.? This is how I learned to do it, but you could be totally right!

Good luck, I hope your presentation went wonderfully!

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