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Belong, Become, Believe:
A New Model For Children's Ministry Building Toward A Holistic Vision Of
Discipleship And Diversity In Multi-Ethnic Children's Ministry

"Belong, Become, Believe"

Katey Hage

Seattle Pacific Seminary

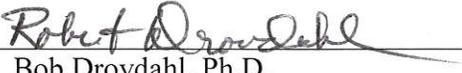
Belong, Become, Believe:
A New Model For Children's Ministry Building Toward A Holistic Vision Of Discipleship
And Diversity In Multi-Ethnic Children's Ministry

Katey Hage

A Thesis Submitted In Partial Fulfillment Of The Requirements Of The Degree Of Master Of
Arts (Christian Studies), Seattle Pacific Seminary

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract

Introduction

The Journey to Thesis.....	3
What Has Been Written.....	5
Thesis Question to be Addressed.....	6

Part One // Barriers to Belonging

History of Children’s Ministry in the US.....	9
Children’s Ministry Rooted in the Sunday School Movement.....	9
The History of Racism in Ministry to Children.....	11
Church Growth and Children’s Ministry.....	17
The Problem of Whiteness.....	18
Assimilation and Christian Community.....	21
Whose Children.....	23

Part Two // Reframing Children’s Ministry: Following Jesus & The Radical Kingdom

Re-imagining Cultural Identity and Belonging.....	26
Defining Children’s Ministry Today.....	26
The Role of Justice and Reconciliation.....	27
The Role of Identity.....	30
Understanding Race and Ethnicity.....	31
Exclusion and Belonging.....	33
Formation of a New Model: Belong, Become Believe.....	37
Embracing Ethnic Identity in Faith Formation.....	37

Building a Framework that Affirms Children’s Identity.....	40
The Danger of Colorblindness.....	44
A Theology of Belong, Become, Believe.....	45
The Imago Dei: Finding our Identity in Christ.....	46
The Triune God: Created for Community.....	47
Ecclesiology: Being the Family of God.....	48
Witness: Presence and Participation in the Kingdom of God.....	50
Setting the Stage: Belong, Become, Believe Model.....	52
Place, Theology, and Practice.....	52
Part Three // B³ Model: Belong, Become, Believe Children’s Ministry Framework	
Belong.....	56
Children at the Center of the Kingdom.....	56
Children are Created for Relationships.....	57
Children Belong.....	58
Become.....	59
Becoming Like Jesus.....	59
Becoming is Transformative.....	61
Believe.....	62
Settling Into Identity.....	62
Seeing in New Ways: The Enactment of Belong, Become, Believe.	64
Conclusion	66
Bibliography	68

ABSTRACT

As the Church in the United States grapples with challenging issues of race and racism that permeate our world, children's ministry is also impacted by these very same issues and lived experiences for a diverse community of people. This thesis seeks to help the church acknowledge that all children have particular racial and cultural identity that is formed within family and social system contexts; and it seeks to affirm the belief that children are God's good creation and made in the image of God. With these truths in place, connections can be drawn between a child's cultural and racial identity and its impact on their faith formation.

This thesis will examine the way that faith is shaped by a journey of formation as racialized individuals in particular communities, and formed by experiences (or lack thereof) of Christ in community. It is broken up into three main parts beginning with 1) the history of children's ministry in the United States, 2) essential aspects of a new framework for children's ministry built upon an awareness of cultural identity, belonging and theological mainstays for a new ministry model, and 3) implications of the model for children's identity, formation and discipleship in the church. There is a resource desert for contextualized, multi-cultural, theologically rich curricula and ministry philosophy for children's ministry. Exploring critical race theory and current children's ministry models of spiritual formation, I suggest a new model of ministry to children and families that is informed by three main concepts of Belong, Become and Believe, or the B³ Model of Children's Ministry leading toward discipleship and diversity in a multi-ethnic world.

Cultural identity and belonging intersect one's understanding of being a disciple of Jesus and belonging to the family of God. Identity and belonging are continually and dynamically forming in and around self in relationship to others, God and the church. Through participation in the church, through spiritual parenting, or through mentorship by other adults, children learn who God is, who they are as image bearers of God, and who they are called to become as faithful followers of Jesus. This thesis seeks to address the gap or lack of theological depth in children's curriculum while creating environments that are warm, welcoming, and inclusive of all types of children. This includes building healthy relationships and empowering children and families to participate with God in God's mission in the world in order to experience transformation in their personal and community-based spiritual lives.

INTRODUCTION

*May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers,
half-truths, and superficial relationships
so that you may live deep within your heart.
May God bless you with anger at injustice,
oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that you may wish for justice, freedom, and peace.
May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe
that you can make a difference in the world,
so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.*

- A Franciscan Blessing

Journey to Thesis

In the summer of 2003, I began my first official role as a children's ministry director at Quest Church in Seattle, WA. Quest was a small, fifty-person church plant with a vision to be a multi-ethnic and innovative urban church. With my three-drawer plastic bin of children's ministry supplies, a handful of volunteers and a small group of kids, we began worshipping together, reading Scripture, acting out Bible stories and figuring out how to do "children's ministry." My dream of working in a cross-cultural, urban, and multi-ethnic ministry setting was realized even as I grew in awareness of how little I was prepared to shepherd and guide kids and families in the multi-ethnic context.

We grew and learned together, stumbled across cultural barriers of all types, and learned early on that embracing diversity in ministry is not just racial and ethnic but also ability, socio-economic, and family structure. I had children on the autism spectrum, children of divorce, children who came out of domestic violence, children with severe allergies which impacted their everyday life, transracially adopted children, children with no siblings, and children with many siblings. I realized that every child came into our ministry with a story. And part of my role was to receive them, to listen to their stories, and to facilitate a space to worship God from that very place in which they were dwelling. My job was not to change, or fix, or improve a child. My job was to faithfully communicate who God is, and watch the Holy Spirit grab hold of a child's attention and nourish their soul so that they could flourish and blossom. I discovered early on that "pre-packaged" children's curriculums, and mega-church ministry models did not fit who we were. What we had were relationships, stories, and a community who worked together, like a village, to raise our community's children.

As the ministry has grown, I have learned things that apply to ministry in a variety of contexts. As we grew from a ministry of five children to a ministry of 450 children over the past fifteen years, our church practices have continually changed and re-formed. However, our practices remain rooted in principles and faith beliefs that are un-changing - truths about who God is, who we are as the people of God, and how God invites us to live in community and in this world. This paper is the fruit of these years of ministry.

After fifteen years of church ministry to children ranging in age from birth through fifth grade, if someone were to ask me what I hope our children would know upon graduating to youth ministry, it would be these three things. First, every child should know that they are made in the image of God and that they were created for community and belonging in Christ. As image bearers of God, we affirm their wholeness, worth and dignity, that God made them on purpose as they are - body, mind and spirit. Their bodies, stories, and life experiences matter to God.

Second, every child should know that following Jesus is a journey, not a one-time encounter. Simply praying a “sinner’s prayer” does not lead a child to faithful life in Christ. True salvation is confessing faith in Jesus and acknowledging sinfulness, but also means being bound up and connected to Christ and the church, living a transformed (and transforming) life of forgiveness, love and restoration to wholeness. This new life in Christ and the family of God requires a child to be continually formed and shaped by a life of worship and faithful practices within the context of a community of believers.

Third, every child should know that belonging in the family of God is an experience of life transformation, of continually being reconciled with God and people. Just like all identity that develops over time, a child’s faith becomes rooted and connected by first being

malleable and flexible in a child who is full of curiosity and wonder. As beliefs take root, they guide a child's heart and actions in following the ways of God's love and justice for self and others.

What has been written?

Within the past fifty years, there is a slow-growing body of theological work around the topic of children's spiritual formation.¹ A leading educator in children's spiritual formation, Marcia Bunge, has written extensively on the child and theology. She laments in *The Child in Christian Thought*, "The absence of well-developed and historically and biblically informed teachings about children in contemporary theology helps explain why many churches often struggle to create and to sustain strong programs in religious education and in child-advocacy ministries."² Alongside this reality there is another growing body of work that addresses race, ethnicity, and culture in children. If the church's theological foundation states that all children are created in the image of God, and at the same time we acknowledge that all children have particular racial and cultural identity formed within family and social system contexts, then there should be a natural connection between a child's cultural/racial identity and faith formation. However, research exploring how race shapes theology and worship practices in children's ministry, and the impact of cultural identity on children's spiritual or faith formation, is virtually non-existent.

¹ Several well-known authors and texts include Marcia J. Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, (Grand

² Marcia Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 4.

Thesis Question to be Addressed

The thesis question to be addressed in this paper is as follows: as a church, what do we teach children and what do we practice that equips students to develop a rooted sense of cultural identity as they “belong, become and believe”³ in Christian community? Through the lens of multi-ethnic ministry, we gain insight on the role of cultural identity and belonging for students in their faith formation. This thesis will examine the way that faith is shaped by a journey of formation as racialized individuals in particular communities, and formed by experiences (or lack thereof) of Christ in community. It will also explore how a child’s spiritual identity grows up in the midst of their cultural, racial, and ethnic identity. I contend that these identities are interconnected and interwoven from the day a child is born, both within themselves and with others as they are knit into the family of God.⁴

This thesis is broken up in to three main parts. It begins with the history of children’s ministry in the United States. Next, I outline essential aspects of a new framework for children’s ministry built upon an awareness of cultural identity, belonging and theological mainstays for a new ministry model. This section introduces the “belong, become, believe” children’s ministry framework or B³ Model. Finally, I explore the three essential themes of the framework and their implications for children’s identity, formation and discipleship in the church. A thesis addressing this topic, in which little research has been done, opens a Pandora’s Box of new ideas to explore and further research to be done. Along the way, I

³ “Belong, become, believe” is the model for children’s ministry that I will introduce in this essay. It speaks to the way that children are invited to belong in Christian community, become followers of Jesus, and develop the beliefs that take root in childhood and adolescence which produce faithful and transformed disciples of Christ.

⁴ Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez’s Practical Theology/Praxis Cycle framework is a helpful tool for actively reflecting on practices in current ministry contexts, and practices that help shape race/ethnic and faith identity in children. Branson and Lau describe theological praxis as a “whole cycle of reflection and study on one hand and engagement and action on the other” (40). This active reflection and reflective action is not stage based but spiral and cyclical, and creates space to stay continually engaged in naming, analyzing, reflecting and re-imagining faith and identity formation in kids. Mark L. Branson and Juan Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2011)

hope to illuminate the threads of God’s justice, love, reconciliation, restoration, and kingdom living, that I envision to be woven into the tapestry of children’s ministry.

Several key terms that help to shape this academic paper must be defined. “Children’s ministry” is the term I will use to define the church’s ministry to children and families, recognizing that church programs and volunteers in those programs focus on caring for kids in partnership with parents and caregivers.⁵ For practical reasons, the term “parent” as opposed to “parent or caregiver” will be used where the writing refers to a person who serves as primary caregiver of a child. This may mean a parent, grandparent, other relative, foster or adoptive parent, or another type of physical/spiritual caregiver. Any of these variations can be substituted to fit the specific relationship, situation, or context being addressed.

In a similar way, it is important to recognize that there are many different types of families in society today. While 69% of the approximate 73 million children in the United States live in a two-parent household⁶, there is a whole spectrum of family experiences and relationships that create the family structure (single parent, divorce, re-marriage, blended family, step-parent, foster family, adoptive, heterosexual, homosexual, etc.). As with the use of the term “parent,” the use of the term “family” should be interpreted inclusively, meaning those adults who lead/guide/parent/shepherd a child. “Family” may not be biological, but those who you belong to and with. In addition, the “church” being addressed is primarily a western, Christian, evangelical context though it is my hope that the principles of this thesis may be contextualized across all Christian denominations.

⁵ “Children, youth, and family ministry” is another common way to refer to this demographic of the church body. I have chosen not to describe the ministry as “children, youth, and family ministry” in part due to the number of words, and also because I am not referring to youth in this body of work, though many of the same principles and concepts could be applied in a youth ministry setting.

⁶ “The Majority of Children Live With Two Parents, Census Bureau Reports”, United States Census Bureau, March 15, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html>.

**PART ONE:
BARRIERS TO BELONGING**

HISTORY OF CHILDREN’S MINISTRY IN THE US

While laying out a new framework for ministry to children, it is helpful to examine the history of children’s ministry and the frameworks that are already in place. It is also helpful to have an understanding of spiritual development formation and racial identity formation in children. Through reviewing historical trends in children’s ministry, developmental theories of childhood faith formation, and critical race theory, gaps in theology and ministry practices are discovered that provide opportunities for deeper reflection and assessment.

Children’s Ministry Rooted in the Sunday School Movement

What we now know as “children’s ministry” in the United States has its roots in the Christian education of children dating to the late 1800s. While early church practices likely included children in worship services with adults, a movement emerged in the late 1700s and became a widespread practice in England, shaping the future of ministry to children. Robert Raikes, an Anglican and local business man of Gloucester, is known as the founder of Sunday school, though scholars acknowledge that he was not alone in his endeavor.⁷ Raikes held a deep commitment to bringing education and reform into the failing prison systems in Gloucester. By teaching prisoners to read and sharing Scripture as a primary text, he drew connections between education and the criminal justice system.

Raikes recognized those with fewer educational opportunities were more likely to be imprisoned. He also noticed that the children of poverty in his neighborhood were lacking productive and meaningful activities on the weekends. Historian Alfred Gregory writes, “In his business life, required as he was to keep himself well acquainted with the condition of

⁷ Alfred Gregory, *Robert Raikes: Journalist and Philanthropist: A History of the Origin of Sunday Schools*, ([Place of publication not identified]: Hardpress Publishing, 2012), 44.

contemporary society, Raikes could not fail to note the neglected state of the juvenile population was one of the most alarming evils of the day.”⁸ Raikes talked to parents and recruited children to join him on Sunday mornings at the local cathedral for Sunday school classes. While building relationships, he taught Christian Scripture and gave instruction on “right living,” hoping to influence and inspire youth to behave in more socially acceptable ways.

Many preachers and teachers in this same time period were providing faith education for children; however, Raikes’ influence was most prominent due to his ownership of a local newspaper and his frequent advocacy and public voice in the community. In my assessment of this relatively compassionate understanding of the beginnings of the Sunday school movement, a closer look reveals that the church has a history of assessing children as problematic and attempting to reform them, essentially to behave as they would want adults to behave. In addition, historians Robert Lynn and Elliot Wright suggest the Sunday school movement was formed with “benevolent Empire beginnings”⁹ that participated in white supremacy, a belief that white people are better than any other racial or ethnic people group.

In this brief survey through the beginnings of the Sunday school movement we see how a societal value for the spiritual formation of children is developing, but is anemic in its praxis. There is growing recognition that spiritual formation is connected to whole life formation- behavior and relationships, vocation and call are often birthed from the place where a person’s value and their education or opportunity have intersected. Where the Sunday School movement is limited is in its understanding of the intersectionality of race,

⁸ They would work in factories all week, and cause a raucous on the weekends. They were labeled as problematic and a nuisance to the middle and upper class. (Gregory, *Robert Raikes*, 55).

⁹ Robert W. Lynn, and Elliott Wright, *The Big Little School: Two Hundred Years of the Sunday School 2d Ed.*, Rev. and Enl. ed., (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1980), 17.

poverty, class, and gender influences on children's spiritual development. This will emerge more clearly in the following historical review.

The History of Racism in Ministry to Children

Painted on the exterior of the new Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama are the words of Maya Angelou- "'history, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."¹⁰ In order to see clearly the state of children's ministry today, we must look back at the history of the church in America, this includes examining racial injustice, one of the founding grievances against the church on North American soil. Colonialism is the foundation on which our nation and the church in America was built. European pilgrims and settlers came not just for religious freedom and "discovery of new land", but enforced their political, religious and cultural way of life on indigenous peoples in America and eventually through the violent, oppressive means of chattel slavery¹¹ on African people's brought to the states. The evil of slavery, the destruction of indigenous peoples, the abuse of labor and skills of various Asian people groups who came to America, and the establishment of the institution of systemic racism that privileged the white body and sought to subjugate, and render powerless people of color- is ours to own. The church is complicit, both in the choice to be silent in the midst of oppression and in its participation.

¹⁰ The Legacy Museum, which is the work of the non-profit Equal Justice Initiative founded by Bryan Stevenson, opened in the spring of 2018 to educate people on the history of slavery and racism in America. It reveals the legacy of slavery, lynching, racial segregation and mass incarceration.

¹¹ The first African people were stolen and brought to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. First as indentured servants, by the 1700's chattel slavery was established and demarcated African people as slaves for life. White missionaries would introduce a particular form of Christianity to African slaves, but for slaves their encounter with God was what James Cone would call, "The spirit of God breaking into the lives of the people" (James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 2).

Christian education was forced on Native American children through violence, abuse, and trauma in Christian boarding schools.¹² Theologian James Cone describes the faith experience of black men, women, and children through the world of song.

The spirituals are songs about black souls, “stretching out into the outskirts of God’s eternity” and affirming that divine reality which lets you know that you are a human being- no matter what white people say. Through the song, black people were able to affirm that Spirit who was continuous with their existence as free beings...They encountered a new reality, a new God not enshrined in white churches and religious gatherings.¹³

From ‘the invisible church’ - where black slaves were able to worship in secret from their slave masters - to the first African Baptist churches established as early as 1773, to be black in America was to live in an oppressive and unjust racialized society; yet freedom and hope in the faithfulness of God were found by encountering God in community.¹⁴ Typically, black children were not given any type of education. In 1787, pastor George Daughaday, one of the first pastors to bring Christian education to the United States who was committed to teaching all children, was caught teaching black children and consequently was drenched with water from a public cistern as punishment.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the lack of support of white, Christian communities, the first black Sunday school of the west was formed in 1829 in Chillicothe, Ohio at the African Methodist

¹² Jayme Shorin writes “the boarding school experiences attempted to get children to betray their culture, their sense of morality and their relationship with the Creator, with nature, and everything they understood to be human...that’s why so many came out broken.” (Introduction to *They Call Me Uncivilized*, by Walter Littlemoon (New York: IUniverse, 2009), xi.).

¹³ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 29.

¹⁴ James Cone lays out the challenging questions of the continued existence of American slavery, and belief in a righteous and liberative God (Cone, “God and Black Suffering” in *The Spiritual and the Blues*, 53-77).

¹⁵ James W. Alexander, D. D., “The Sunday School in its Relations to the Church”, *The Methodist Quarterly Review*, Volume 39, (Philadelphia: [publisher unknown], 1857), 518.

Episcopal church (AME). In 1830, the goal of the Sunday school was “to establish a Sunday School in every destitute place.”¹⁶ In the midst of racial injustice in the development of Christian education in the United States, places that were defined as “destitute” would have been marked by oppression, poverty, and marginalized people groups - mainly communities of color. Despite this, the youth proved resilient. In 1859, it was children who led the first protest and jail sit-in. Four hundred children from Oberlin Sabbath School Association performed a jail sit-in because their Sunday school superintendent was jailed for working on the Underground Railroad in Cleveland.¹⁷

Asian American children have also experienced marginalization. Timothy Tseng and Jonathan Wu write of the challenges for Asian Americans in *Honoring the Generations*:

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Asians, regardless of national origin, were perceived as so utterly foreign that cultural integration to white America was considered impossible. This idea justified the passage of laws that prohibited Asians from entering, gaining citizenship, and purchasing property in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century United States.¹⁸

This cultural isolation would impact Asian American children throughout history in the United States. Still today, Asian American children are often seen as the “perpetual

¹⁶ Lynn and Wright, *The Big Little School*, 66.

¹⁷ This story is peculiar and not truly reflective of the whole of the Sunday School Unions, however it is a hopeful break from the racist practices of white Christians in this era, as they wrestled with how to participate in the abolition of slavery. “The youngsters went to Cleveland on the invitation of Plymouth Church’s Sunday school and filled up the jail, considerably “enlivening” it. Four days after they went home their superintendent was released” (Lynn and Wright, *The Big Little School*, 65).

¹⁸ Timothy Tseng & Jonathan Wu, “Children of Light” in *Honoring the Generations*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2012) 155.

foreigner” or “model minority”, caught up in a liminal space between Black Americans and European-Americans.¹⁹

Without cataloging the details of marginalization of children in the church across all racial and ethnic groups²⁰, we can clearly see that the Protestant Evangelical Church in the United States has a history of perpetuating racism, classism, and marginalization of poor communities, many times in violent ways. In 1963, during the Jim Crow era and Civil Rights movement, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair, four young, African American girls were killed in a racially motivated church bombing in Birmingham Alabama by white supremacists. Sadly, history continues to repeat itself, as we witnessed in the horrific mass shooting and hate crime by white supremacist Dylan Roof at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. These stories are the tip of the iceberg of racial injustice in the United States.

The realities of living in a racialized society cannot be ignored when discussing the spiritual formation of our children. Researchers Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin studied children in a preschool setting to learn how kids come to understand race and racism. Their research came in response to the wide spread practices of studying adult perspectives on child development rather than studying the social world of the child. They discovered that

¹⁹ Understanding the history of Japanese and Chinese Americans is critical to interpreting race dynamics today. *The Color of Success* author Ellen D. Wu describes what it means to be Japanese or Chinese American as shaped by blackness and whiteness, but also Asian/Asian American communities’ impact as integral in race relations through American history (Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 7). In the liminal space Asian Americans, find themselves in between- not accepted as white people, yet not fully seen by other people of color such as those who are Latino, Black or mixed. “Perpetual foreigner” describes the way that Asian American and Asian Pacific Islander with always be seen as “other” in dominant white culture contexts. The term “model minority” refers to the stereotype that Asian Americans demonstrate certain high levels of success of all ethnic minorities in America, which other ethnic groups should seek to attain.

²⁰ I recognize this thesis is limited in its exploration of the complicated history of race in the United States with Hispanic communities, and the broad range of Asian American, Asian Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian communities as well. The use of the term “Asian American” in this essay acknowledges the diversity with Asian ethnicities represented in the states.

“from an early age, children are immersed in this pervasive and informal system of racism... they acquire techniques of dealing with members of other racial and ethnic groups.”²¹ In recognizing the racial realities of our nation, this thesis acknowledges that we live in a society that privileges whiteness; and that a dominant culture, colonialist, and individualistic ideology shapes both church and society in America.

In summary, while there is an element of positive impact on children through the Sunday school movement and church history, it is imperative to note that the experience of Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American children was drastically different from the white, Euro-American child experience. Racialized practices have continued, often in implicit and nuanced form, throughout the further development of children’s spiritual formation. Acknowledging the history of racism in society and the church is part of the work that must be done to break down the barriers to belonging in Christian community. Dominique Gilliard says, “In order to faithfully move forward as the church and as a nation, we must learn to hold the good with the bad as opposed to denying the shameful elements of our past. Only then can we lament and turn back to God.”²² I envision a new children’s ministry framework in the church that does not hide from racial difference, does not ignore racialized systems, and does not doubt the work of the Holy Spirit to transform individual hearts and restore whole communities.

²¹ Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin, *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 178.

²² Dominique DuBois Gilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration : Advocating for Justice That Restores* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 135.

Church Growth and Children Ministry

In our journey through the history of ministry to children in the United States, it is also important to note how children's programs were often the tool for church growth movement of the early twentieth century. Soong Chan Rah dedicated a chapter of his book, *The Next Evangelicalism*, to the detrimental impact of the Church Growth movement on American evangelism. The movement was founded by Donald McGavran, a missionary in India, and prioritized individual salvation and the great commission (Matt 28:19)²³ over and against the great commandment to love one's neighbor (Luke 10:27; Matt 22:37-39) and seek the flourishing of whole communities (Jer 29:4-7). "The early roots of the church growth movement began with the emphasis on individual salvation and personal evangelism...resulting in an unbiblical divorce of social justice and personal evangelism."²⁴

The work of seeking liberation, restoration of broken communities, and pursuing justice for marginalized and oppressed people was torn away from the gospel message of salvation and replaced with seeker-friendly evangelistic messages, worship services, and outreach ministries. In the 1940s and 1950s, the midweek programs Young Life and Youth for Christ were started in attempts to reach underprivileged and un-churched youth. Henrietta Mears, a Christian educator, evangelist, and author wrote and taught about the significance of teaching the Bible to age-specific groups, and was influential in developing the age-specific Sunday school model for churches. Mears founded Gospel Light, which expanded her influence through published materials. Other large Christian organizations like Willowcreek Church, planted by Bill and Lynn Hybels in 1975 and Group Magazine (now Group Publishing) created by Thom Schultz in 1974 were influential in the development of

²³ All Scripture referenced in this thesis will come from the New Revised Standard Version.

²⁴ Soong Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009) 97.

programs as well. They increased the training and development of ministry leaders in churches through the written platform, conferences, and mass production of replicable programs, leadership principles, and ministry practices that shaped the Large Group/Small Group model of ministry to kids found in many churches today.

The church growth movement also engaged the homogenous unit principle which was a practiced belief that church growth is more successful along racially segregated lines, further perpetuating the reality of racism in the church. Rah suggests it is the church's captivity to western white culture that allows racism, separation of social justice, and individual/communal salvation. "De facto segregation perpetuated by the church growth movement yielded a disenfranchisement of nonwhites from the larger evangelical movement as Western, white values of success shaped American evangelism's perception of success."²⁵

During the late twentieth century, an emphasis was placed on church as primary spiritual nurturer of children's faith through the development and refinement of Christian education curriculum, and the new practice of hiring children's ministers and Christian educators. A church that had a children's director or children's pastor could draw more families, grow the church, and, over time, became the hub for children's spiritual formation through Sunday school, midweek programs, and special outreach events. In the last fifteen to twenty years, there have been renewed efforts by churches to re-connect parents to their children's spiritual formation, reinstating the belief that parents are a child's primary spiritual mentors.

There are several mainstream curriculums and resource networks in children's ministry that address spiritual formation of children and spiritual parenting. Such curriculums include the *Tru Curriculum* published by David C. Cook, *Think Orange* by Reggie Joiner,

²⁵ Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 98.

based out of North Point Community Church, a mega-church in Georgia, and *The Gospel Project* by Lifeway, to name a few. Each of these curricula use a Large Group/Small Group or classroom model to engage children in discipleship and worship, separate from adult worship spaces (affectionately called “Big Church”). Largely influenced by the mega-church experience of the twenty-first century, many churches feel the need to keep families engaged through Disney-like ministry spaces and attractive events with an entertainment value.

This pendulum swing from church as primary to parent as primary has found itself somewhere in the middle with a partnership between church and parent. The key to the success of these programs is regular attendance and family engagement of the Scripture and Bible lessons being taught. In critical reflection, American churches still lack a robust recognition that ministry to children and families is most successful when it is local and contextualized to the community it serves. This requires an awareness of who is present in a community, and an acknowledgement of the power of intergenerational, interdependent and corporate identity on a child’s faith.²⁶

The Problem of Whiteness

In the book *Dear White Christians*, Jennifer Harvey identifies the problem of whiteness as a key issue of racial injustice- and the need to name and deconstruct it.²⁷

When whiteness is absented from our analysis of the problem of racial injustice, racism becomes conceived as a problem pertaining primarily to Black people or other people of color, even among those who would agree that theological or moral imperatives exist for ending oppression. Yet without a direct acknowledgement of

²⁶ “The priority of the individual shapes how American evangelicals live out our local church experience, how we study and learn Scripture, how we shape our corporate worship and even how we live and interact in the community” (Rah, *The Next Evangelical*, 33). Hyper-individualism distorts the gospel and limits our corporate identity as God’s people.

²⁷ Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 11.

white behavior and the active participation of white people in our racial relationships, without the choice to take full ownership of and responsibility for white agency, without work to understand what it is about whiteness that makes it difficult for white people to do so, it is impossible for us to get to the root of racial brokenness.²⁸

Whiteness is a social construct, like the term ‘race’, with real and tangible effects on people. White culture, values and norms are seen as neutral and they define what is “normal” in society. Whiteness is an ever-shifting boundary separating those with privileges (defined as systemic social, political, education, health, economic advantages), from those without.²⁹ Whiteness, as an integral part of dominant culture and dominant culture Christianity, is problematic in children’s ministry as well. Ministry to children happens in a diverse set of contexts- rural, urban, suburban, small church, large church, multi-ethnic, or ethnic specific churches (this includes culturally or demographically mono-ethnic churches such as white, Black, Asian and Latino churches). By and large, all these ministry contexts have access to the same children’s spiritual formation resources, ministry models, curricula and ministry philosophies, which are shaped, produced and commercialized by dominant culture churches and publishing organizations. There is a resource desert for contextualized, multi-cultural, theologically rich curricula and ministry philosophy for children’s ministry.³⁰

²⁸ Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 12.

²⁹ For a more in-depth look at whiteness I suggest New York Times Opinion Article by Nell Irvin Painter, “What Is Whiteness”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/what-is-whiteness.html>, University of Calgary CARED “Understanding Whiteness”, <http://www.ucalgary.ca/cared/whiteness>, and Teaching Tolerance article, “Why Talk About Whiteness”, Emily Chiariello, <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/why-talk-about-whiteness>, May 10, 2018.

³⁰ Throughout my research a handful of resources were brought to my attention which included an ecumenical children and youth conference called *Faith Forward* (<https://www.faith-forward.net/>), addressing contextual ministry in contemporary contexts, and the work of Almeda Wright on spiritual development of African American youth (Wright, Almeda M. *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Daniel White Hodge, an expert in urban youth culture.

When it comes to our theology of faith and racial justice, it is important for the church to examine what it believes and understands to be true about who God is and who we are as the diverse and multi-cultural³¹ people of God. Do we believe in a God who sees and loves people of every race, class, and creed? This reflection is not simply along black and white lines. We are a racially and ethnically mixed people. Our families may be mono-ethnic or mono-cultural, but they also may be multi-cultural, bi-racial, mixed, blended. More and more family dynamics are complex and integrated, or cross-cultural and multi-layered. Within this complex web of relationships, people and stories, a person's faith is shaped by their journey of formation as racialized individuals in Christian community.

Just as we are a physical people of particular ethnic and cultural makeup, Jesus assumed a physical and particular form – an ethnic, male Jew. His ethnic and cultural identity cannot be ignored, nor can it be separated from his full humanity and full divinity (John 1:14). But it is his in-betweenness that helps us see a way forward out of whiteness. Brian Bantum's work in *Redeeming Mulatto*, weaves connections between the interracial or mixed person's lived experience, to that of Jesus' incarnational presence and mulatto existence.³² He illuminates our need to see the hybridity of Jesus as way of re-imagining the multi or "mixed"-community that is the church, even as we navigate the painful realities of race and racism. One helpful image is the newly baptized person entering into community. Bantum writes:

The reception of the initiate is the slow grafting of their lives into the life of the community, including the slow transformation of the community itself as the

³¹ Here cultural difference can be understood as gender, race, ability, age, class, etc.

³² "Through the fissures of discourse that render "mixed bodies" possible we can see Christ's own life as the ground of this peculiar personhood, even as he is its salvation" (Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 83).

difficulties, challenges, and hopes of that person or those people [are] received by the community...we cannot enter this body and deny difference among us. To be in Christ is to enter those strange bodies in our midst, we must be baptized into Christ and bound to one another.³³

The constructs of whiteness and race lead to racism, which is an assault on the humanity, wholeness and dignity of all persons. As privilege and power are used to oppress people, in reality, it diminishes the humanity of the oppressor. The church needs correctives that over time will lead to transformation. Small transformations occur in our churches when those who are not valued by society are valued as human beings with dignity and worth in the church.³⁴ In addition to naming whiteness and deconstructing it (as a way to bring freedom and liberation to all people) the way in which community incorporates and embraces one another matters.

Assimilation and Christian Community

For many generations the American church has enacted a particular theology of personal spiritual development and belonging in Christian community based on an individualistic understanding of sin, salvation and repentance.³⁵ We teach children that in order to belong, one must first believe in God, and confess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Second, one's behaviors must change to align with the normative or socially

³³ Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 163.

³⁴ Christine Pohl, "Hospitality, Dignity, and the Power of Recognition" in *Making Room*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 62.

³⁵ Rah describes "individuation" as a positive outcome of western evangelical culture where by we experience an "important and necessary process of developing personal relationship with Jesus" (33), juxtaposed with individualism predicated in fundamentalist theology that has given permission to the prioritizing of the individual, privatizing of faith, removing a value for corporate identity, and allows responsibility for individual sin and guilt. "When sin is limited to the individual realm and does not extend to the corporate realm, our understanding of salvation is also limited...sin, therefore, is found only in the individual, not in structures and systems" (Rah, *The Next Evangelical*, 40).

acceptable practices of that faith community (what to wear, what music to listen to, how to pray, interpretation of the Bible, who to be in relationship with, etc). Finally, a person who has confessed faith and reformed their behavior (stopped lying, changed daily habits, engaged particular faith practices, etc.) can belong in community. This model assumes a rigid sequence as one's sense of identity and belonging follows acceptance based on behavior and beliefs practiced.

Believe.

Become.

Belong.

One conspicuous example in American history is that of Christian boarding schools for Native American children, as mentioned earlier. Native children were literally taken from their families and home, stripped of all indigenous cultural identity - language, food, clothing, traditions, and family relationships. They were required to confess faith in the God of the white people who had stolen them, and required to take on the clothing, language, and English names of their oppressors, and then they were considered "saved" from their heathen ways.³⁶ This egregious practice and narrow theology does not account for the ways that God is seen in many different cultures, the ways God draws people to God-self, and does not recognize the way God's Spirit is already at work among all people groups.

It is true that at the heart of God's mission is 'evangelism' which is defined as sharing the gospel with our words through proclamation, and our lives embodying faith.³⁷ Colonizing indigenous and marginalized or oppressed peoples, and rendering them invisible, is

³⁶ Walter Littlemoon documents his personal experience of being sent to a boarding school in chapter six of his book, *They Call Me Uncivilized*, (New York: IUniverse, 2009) 20.

³⁷ Lacey Warner, "Evangelism and Mission", (Seattle Pacific Seminary Lecture, THEO 6741 Evangelism and Mission, Session 1, June 13, 2017).

antithetical to the gospel and God's mission. This abuse of power and expectation of assimilation to dominant white culture still permeates the church in America today. It must be contended that the beauty of God's kingdom will be reflected by all "tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev 7:9), not the washing away of one's particular culture, story and identity. If the suburban church growth model is not the way, and the cultural bleaching of identity is not the way, then perhaps there is another way forward for ministry to and with children.

Whose Children?

The church in America is diverse in many ways. From size to location, to racial/ethnic make-up; from denomination, to theology, to practices, to liturgy. There is not one singular expression of the church. Factors addressed in this paper which are critical to understanding children's faith and racial or ethnic identity, are problematized with the recognition that there are differing experiences and structures of families, which has different implications for each church context. We live in a society in which there are more mixed race and interracial people and families than ever before. We see cultural lines blurred, blending, integrating and adapting. People's racial and ethnic identities are complex and fluid, not fixed.

It is in reflection on the gospel message of Jesus's embodied life that we capture an image of what is possible for the people of God. "To participate in Christ's life is to welcome the many and the transformation of practices, lives and culture that such mutual incorporation requires...distinctions which create something new, something beyond."³⁸This is an enormous challenge for the church, to help children integrate their particular ethnic and cultural identity, alongside their web of relationships, and social realities and possible

³⁸ Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 119.

inequities into their spiritual life. It has proved so challenging that most children cannot make these connections on their own. Practical Theologian Almeda Wright troubles the waters of race and faith in her reflection on African American youth's spirituality. As youth may differentiate between everyday life and spiritual life, separating the spiritual from the political and the personal from the communal- she urges the church to see this "fragmented spirituality" and respond with the truth that God can empower youth to combat cycles and systems of oppression and injustice. Even a student who has a strong personal faith, or a student who has a deep commitment to social justice and activism needs the church to demonstrate how the communal and the personal are integrally connected and how that which is spiritual cannot be divorced from that which is political.³⁹ The Black church, or the first generation immigrant church, or Latino church, or refugee church- may be the best place for a child to grow up with a deep sense of cultural identity and faith identity integration. For children not in these particular contexts faith and racial identity formation will come about in different ways. The early church might be our glimpse of hope for all children (Acts 2). The early disciples were a diverse group of individuals with a common denominator as "living manifestations of new life in the coming kingdom, not only as individuals but also as an integrated group in their life and witness: a base community committed to Jesus and his kingdom- an incarnational sign of the kingdom."⁴⁰ This is the type of Christian community that we call all children and youth into as followers of Jesus.

³⁹ Almeda M. Wright, "Introduction: Overwhelmed," in *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2017. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190664732.003.0001.

⁴⁰ Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1984), 6.

**PART TWO:
REFRAMING CHILDREN'S MINISTRY:
FOLLOWING JESUS & THE RADICAL
KINGDOM**

RE-IMAGINING CULTURAL IDENTITY & BELONGING

Defining Children's Ministry Today

In 2010, a seminal book titled *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus* described a new generation of children's ministry by contending that what matters most today is faithfulness to Jesus and how he modeled with his words and actions how we are called to live. In this book, Ivy Beckwith and David Csinos define ministry to children as "serving children, caring for them, and forming them into people who serve one another and the world in the way of Jesus...[it is] anything and everything we do to serve children as they walk on the spiritual journey."⁴¹ In today's context, the church cares for the whole child- body, mind, and soul through children's ministry (Deut 6:5, Mark 12:30, Matt 22:37, Luke 10:27) and nurtures faith in ways that help children follow Jesus genuinely. Beckwith and Csinos speak a challenging message to children's ministry leaders across the nation. "An exciting and innovative approach to ministry is worthless if it diverges from the peace, love, wholeness and restoration inherent in the gospel, and if it does not educate and encourage children to become authentic and faithful disciples of Jesus."⁴² In summary, Jesus' life and ministry are our model for discipleship of children.

Leaders in children's ministry today are exploring the culture shifts happening in churches, and asking questions about theology and ministry practices that help all generations rediscover faithful Christianity. For Beckwith and Csinos, the end goal is an ecclesial community that keeps spiritual formation at the center of ministry to and with children. It is formation focused on interconnectedness, and cultivating a spirit of love and justice in our children. My critique of *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus* and others

⁴¹ Ivy Beckwith and Dave M. Csinos, *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 36-37.

⁴² Beckwith and Csinos, *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus*, 22.

books written in recent years about ministry to children and families is that what often goes unaddressed or unarticulated are the ways that our understanding of race and ethnicity impact people and ministry.

The Evangelical Church is at a crisis point today. While our nation becomes more ethnically diverse and we encounter more mixed race families and bi or multi-racial children, our churches remain racially segregated. Our faith practices - particularly those of dominant culture, white, Evangelical churches - do not exemplify the prolific nature of God's love and justice within race, gender, ability, and socioeconomic paradigms, even though those faith characteristics are prevalent throughout Scripture and demonstrated through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.⁴³ What does it look like to be faithful to Jesus and live out the radical vision of God's kingdom here on earth (Matt 6:33, Mark 1:15) through loving God and loving our neighbors? What are we modeling for our children in the ways we embrace unique cultural identity and communal faith practices that edify and build up the whole of our communities?⁴⁴

The Role of Justice and Reconciliation

Justice and reconciliation are essential theological underpinnings of this new framework for ministry to children and families. Brenda Salter McNeil, theologian and prophetic voice on matters of reconciliation and the church, defines reconciliation as “an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken

⁴³ While our demographics change, Soong Chan Rah points out in *The Next Evangelicalism*, that “the theological formation and dialogue remains captive to white Christianity”, represented by a dominant white male leadership, and “more accurately reflects the values, culture and ethos of Western, white American culture than the values of Scripture” (20).

⁴⁴ Rah suggests change will come from embracing nonwhite expressions of Christianity in the United States including, for example, the African American community, Native American Christian theology, and “liminal, bicultural expression of multi-cultural community” (*The Next Evangelicalism*, 22-23).

relationships and systems to reflect God’s original intention for all creation to flourish.”⁴⁵ It is rooted in a biblical understanding of God’s shalom for all people, acknowledges history, and transcends individualistic views of reconciliation. As a companion to this definition, I find the work of Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice in *Reconciling All Things* provides helpful insight into the role justice plays alongside reconciliation. They argue that we cannot have reconciliation that does not have a memory of the wounds of history, nor can our vision of reconciliation be limited to diversity and inclusion. Justice is critical to the work of reconciliation because it reveals the truth of evil and sin in the world and so “the quest for reconciliation and the quest for doing justice are closely connected to the quest for truth.”⁴⁶ The truth is that Jesus modeled for us with his life and sacrifice what we now remember at the Lord’s Table. It was a bringing together of that which was once torn apart. And so “justice without communion” is to practice justice without envisioning the new relationship and future community being formed.⁴⁷

This is especially important as this thesis envisions a multi-ethnic children’s ministry framework that is based on diversity, inclusion, and reconciliation. This framework is welcoming and inclusive of all different types of families. A church practicing reconciliation does not simply welcome a diverse group of people into worship; it is one that seeks to represent⁴⁸ and honor the diverse cultures and communities embodied in that particular church context. But it is not enough for churches to be ethnically diverse. I am also not

⁴⁵ Brenda Salter McNeil, *RoadMap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 22.

⁴⁶ Rice & Katongole, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 32.

⁴⁷ Rice & Katongole, *Reconciling All Things*, 33.

⁴⁸ Representation of culture may include people in leadership, people who serve in visible roles in the church, types of music, imagery used in worship services, art or imagery in church building, or church publications, type of bread used for communion, paint colors on walls and languages heard in worship services, to name a few examples.

intending to suggest that all churches seek to conform to a certain type of multi-ethnicity. Many churches in the United States may remain majority white, or ethnic specific. Part of this work is to ask why a congregation is what it is, and understand the repercussions for ministry. Regardless, I assert that all ministry to children and families must bear witness to the work of justice and reconciliation in Christian faith, no matter the context.

The pursuit of God's justice and a biblical understanding of reconciliation are key to children and family ministry in the church. It is our personal responsibility and community identity as the body of Christ (Rom 12:4-5, 1 Cor 12:27, Eph 1:20-23, Col 1:18) to accept our call to the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-18). In recognizing the injustices of our society - including racism, ableism, sexism, xenophobia, and classism - we see the need for reconciliation between God and people and also reconciliation of people within systems and structures. When the church opts to center whiteness and theology of dominant culture in children's ministry instead of embracing richer and more diverse theology and practices that create authentic community and meaningful connection for the many different types of families in our churches, cultural identity competes with faith identity. Children must choose between believing in a God who wants them to assimilate to a dominant culture or deny a faith that would render invisible the gifts that their body and culture may bring to Christian community. Children's ministry leaders today must ask, "How is ministry to children shaped by a child's racial or ethnic identity and experience of the world?"

The Role of Identity

Understanding identity is an important aspect of reframing the way children's ministry is structured. Critical theorist Stuart Hall describes identity as the process of identification.⁴⁹ Identity is what a person believes to be true about themselves based on external and internal influences.⁵⁰ It is shaped by how one sees themselves, how they perceive others to see them, and how they experience the world in relationship to others. These external and internal forces create language⁵¹ that gives meaning in any given context that defines who a person is and who they are not.⁵² Identification is never complete, but always forming. According to critical theorist Chris Weedon, identities may be "socially, culturally

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, (London: Sage, 1996), 2-6.

⁵⁰ A great example of this is two recent documentaries, *The Mask You Live In*, and *Miss Representation*, which reveal the power of imagery in social media, and language and behaviors that young boys and girls are taught as gender appropriate. They reveal implicit bias that forms around gender and sexual identity that shapes young children's view of themselves, their confidence and social identity which impacts how they view and interact with others around them. *Miss Representation* reveals the impact of media and culture on the under-representation of women in positions of power and influence in the US. Women are noted for their bodies, type-cast in domestic roles, or seen as the 'princess-in-distress', marketed for beauty and fashion instead of science and business. Commentary on the intersectionality between race and social media can be found in this article: "Intersectionality: How Gender Interacts with Other Social Identities to Shape Bias" (<http://theconversation.com/intersectionality-how-gender-interacts-with-other-social-identities-to-shape-bias-53724>, 4/18/2018). *The Mask You Live In* implicates the language associated with what it means to be a man, explains the challenges of hyper-masculinity in society, and how language manipulates emotions, ideas and actions to perpetuate stereotypes about what it means to be male or female. These documentaries, while lacking in commentary on the intersectionality of race and social gender stereotypes, give witness to the challenges that boys and girls face, and demonstrate the power of language to shape society. *The Mask You Live In*, directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom (2015; San Francisco, CA: Kanopy Streaming, 2015), DVD, *Miss Representation*, ed. OWN Documentary Club, directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom, (2012; New York: Virgil Films & Entertainment, 2012), DVD.

⁵¹ In a lecture on Christology: Representation and Performativity, Brian Bantum introduced the 'language of performativity' as taught by theorist Judith Butler which describes a way of understanding the notion of identity through norms and normative language that has power to form individuals and groups in particular ways. Norms become acceptable ways of viewing people or understanding the world, typically by the dominant group in any given society or context- those who have power and privilege. (Brian Bantum, "Representation and Performativity", THEO 6060 Doctrine of Christ, (Session 5, February 2, 2016).

⁵² For example, in Children's Ministry we see the ways that meaning is assigned to children and adults: who assumes the role of "teacher" or "student"; and the ways a student in the minority ethnic group of a mixed ethnic community or dominant culture community may be stereotyped by others, experiencing particular isolation whether culturally, relationally or simply because the color of the skin draws an invisible line about acceptance and belonging. This can be implicit or explicit, but shapes who sees themselves as "family", or "visitor", or part of the "group".

or institutionally assigned,”⁵³ describing the ways that identity is tied to race, ethnicity, cultural practices, nationality, citizenship, gender, and other aspects of life.⁵⁴

Within the broader understanding of identity, race and ethnic identity are crucial for individual and community formation. Awareness of this has implications for the church. The church is a community that cannot be fully understood apart from knowing the people who are in it. The church needs to be cognizant of how race and ethnicity shape our communities and people. Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M. L. Moya, editors of the book of essays *Doing Race*, are dedicated to the idea that race and ethnicity are not who people are, but actions people do. They argue that race and ethnicity are “social, historical and philosophical processes” that have been around for hundreds of years impacting people and social/institutional systems globally.⁵⁵

Understanding Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity are part of our identity, but they are also a social construct by which meaning is made in society. They are “a complex system of ideas and practices”⁵⁶ and a way to describe and classify people based on visible characteristics of human bodies that manufactures meaning around people’s character, intellect, and behavior. The concept of *race* has no meaning in and of itself, but rather through human action and participation in race we notice particular physical characteristics, assign meaning to those characteristics and participate in the continuation of stereotypes and social structure hierarchies based on our perception of race. This hierarchy that has been established assumes one race is superior to

⁵³ Chris Weedon. *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*, (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education, 2004), 6.

⁵⁴ Chris Weedon describes how identity is made visible through cultural signs and practices, how it becomes performative through the establishment of language and norms that are socialized, and how race/class/power place limitations or restrictions on ones experience of cultural identity, particularly as it relates to belongingness (“Subjectivity and Identity” in *Identity and Culture*).

⁵⁵ Markus and Moya, *Doing Race*, 4.

⁵⁶ Markus and Moya, *Doing Race*, 22.

people associated with another race, therefore justifying their inequity in society.⁵⁷ Whether we see it or not, race is doing work - on our bodies, in our education and government systems, and in our neighborhoods and workplaces.⁵⁸ We live in a racialized society which lives out certain ideologies through words and practices that define what it means to be Black, white, Asian, Latino and Native American.⁵⁹

Ethnicity is different from race. Ethnicity is a collective and individual identity with a group of people shaped by historical, institutional, and cultural practices of commonality. This can include language, religion, music, and ancestry, and is often associated with a sense of pride and belonging. Our children learn to eat certain foods, speak certain ways, and have various relationships with certain types of people based on ethnicity. Within their cultural or group identity, they learn what is "normal,"⁶⁰ what is different, what is similar, and what is liked and disliked. They learn music, culture, color, and speech in certain ways. Whether spoken or unspoken, visible or invisible, each family has a story of who they are and who each person in the family is becoming. Race and ethnic diversity are realities of American society that require us to practice what Jennifer Harvey, in a book called *Raising White Kids*, calls "race-conscious" parenting. This term means to notice and name race early and, in addition, to think, talk, and act in ways that recognize the realities of race in our world.⁶¹

Children need to be raised by adults who can talk about race. Churches need to be places

⁵⁷ Markus and Moya, *Doing Race*, 23.

⁵⁸ "The church needs to account for the ways that race is like a technology in our society. Whether like an iPhone or Kindle, it's a sophisticated system that we learn to use intuitively. If we want to teach a counter way to disrupt race, it needs to be complex, and specific to combat the complex system of race" (Brian Bantum, Independent Study Lecture, November 5 2016).

⁵⁹ This is a continuation of Judith Butler's language of performativity listed above.

⁶⁰ What is considered normal or typical is usually defined by dominant culture. This includes names that "sound normal", foods that smell or taste "normal," behaviors that are socially acceptable, how we define disability in society, gender identities, type-cast social roles based on gender, race and socio-economics, etc. More information can be found in Sociologist Allan Horowitz's book, *What is Normal: Reconciling Biology and Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Building cultural awareness helps expand notions of normalcy and see difference as acceptable parts of the culture that defines what is "normal".

⁶¹ Jennifer Harvey, *Raising White Kids*, 42.

where the love of God is evident for all people and where the gospel speaks to the injustices of racism, of unjust systems, and our role as participants in the kingdom of God to dismantle racism and pursue just living, to bring healing and restoration into the world.

Exclusion and Belonging

Brian Bantum instructs students at Seattle Pacific Seminary to recognize that “patterns of exclusion and inclusion, of belonging and foreignness, are not a spectrum but a vast web that entangles all of us.”⁶² He challenges the notions of inequity and the structures of oppression that are inherent in this negotiating of racial difference and assignment of meaning to race, culture and ethnicity based on power, privilege, and the idea of a supreme white being.⁶³ Culturally, most Americans function as independent persons in an individualistic society.⁶⁴ However, based on how we have described identity indicates that people are formed in community and shaped by the people, stories and experiences that surround them. No individual’s identity can be known apart from others.

Cultural identity is collective and interdependent. Even within racial difference, cultural identity creates belongingness and belongingness is a key to spiritual connection in the church. Brené Brown defines spirituality as the belief that we are inextricably connected to each other and rooted in love.⁶⁵ According to Brown, we are experiencing a crisis of spiritual connection and love in the church body because people continue to sort themselves

⁶² Brian Bantum, Lecture paper, THEO 6510 Theology Race and Culture (Session 1, October 1, 2015), 5.

⁶³ During the Enlightenment Period, interpretations of non-European bodies- both scientific and theological- were developed and solidified, and served as the foundation for American Slave trade and the colonization of black and brown peoples and communities throughout the world, by classifying white- European bodies as superior, more advanced and all other bodies as less then, leading to the identification of the Blackness of Africans as not fully human.

⁶⁴ The church is held captive by dominant, white culture; Rah explains why it is problematic. “The danger of Western, white captivity of the church is an excessive individualism and personalism that reflects the narcissism of American culture rather than the redemptive power of the gospel message” (Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 33).

⁶⁵ Brené Brown, “Sunday Sermon” (presentation, Washington National Cathedral, Washington D.C., January 21, 2018), February 20, 2018, <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-dr-brene-brown/>.

into ideological bunkers and, in American evangelicalism, tend to worship with people who think like, look like, and act like themselves.⁶⁶ Behind these barricades of belief is a lack of true connection leading to loneliness, which research confirms is a predictor of early death.⁶⁷ Brown suggests an antidote to this loneliness and lack of connection is to break through barriers in three ways: 1) sing with strangers in church, 2) pass the peace with people that one might not agree with, and 3) break bread (take communion) with people that are different than oneself.⁶⁸ In this practice, it is not about removing differences in community but embracing community and its differences.

Poet and prolific writer Audre Lorde said it this way, “Without community there is no liberation...but community must not mean a shedding of our differences nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”⁶⁹ Within a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse world, there is richness found for a person in belonging to a Christian community that does not always look, think, or act like oneself.⁷⁰ It is through the practice of sharing story and being in authentic relationship with others that we can know ourselves better and know and see others more truly. We grow as human beings when we open ourselves up to people who are different from us, expanding our embrace.

⁶⁶ Christena Cleveland, “How Divisions are Killing Us and Why We Should Care”, in *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 24-43.

⁶⁷ “Actual and perceived social isolation are both associated with increased risk for early mortality.” Julianne Holt-Lunstad, et. al, “Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality,” *A Meta-Analytic Review* 10 no. 2, (March 11, 2015), 227-237.

⁶⁸ Brené Brown, “Sunday Sermon,” (Washington Cathedral Sermon, January 21, 2018), <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-dr-brene-brown/>.

⁶⁹ Audre Lorde, written source unknown.

⁷⁰ One helpful resource for understanding the work of reconciliation within the church is Brenda Salter McNeil’s book *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice*. The visual roadmap for transformation in communities includes several phases or cycles that people move through toward unity and belonging including catalytic events that bring realization or understanding of racial injustice, identification with others, preparing for lasting change, actively working together for reconciliation. Salter McNeil casts a vision for beloved community, “our ongoing collective participation in the process of reconciliation can transform a society into a place where shalom becomes a greater reality and all people can thrive” (124).

Scripture reveals the ways that God first extended embrace and invitation to community as a model for the church to follow. In the Old Testament Abrahamic covenant, God declares, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen 17:7). In the New Testament, Jews and Gentiles are brought into the family of God through faith in Christ. As stated in Ephesians 2:12-13:

Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

The church is intended to be the expression of God’s covenant love for the world and all people are invited to identification and belonging in this beloved community (Eph 2).

Congregants in any church, but particularly people of color who often feel the weight of assimilation into dominant culture churches, may ask, “How is my ethnic identity a part of the story of the church?”

Those involved in children and family ministry must examine the ways we can help students claim their ethnic identity and story as a specific part of their faith identity. In my experiences working in the church, I have seen the ways that students light up, seek out, or become more comfortable socially in spaces where there are adults who look like them, or share similar culture or language backgrounds.

- *You’re hair looks like mine-* young Black girls who see Black women in the church wear their hair natural and make note of its beauty
- *We speak a similar language-* meeting someone who speaks a child’s native tongue whether it be ASL, Spanish or Aramaic, etc.

- *Music that brings connection*- a student who connects to rap in worship in a uniquely different way than other genres or more common worship styles
- *Connection through dance*- the student of color that chooses to attend an “adult” worship service instead of children’s church so they can watch the multi-ethnic dance team

Experiences like these confirm the power of seeing cultural differences normalized and re-shape the narrative of what are acceptable cultural norms and standards in the church.

Students who experience shame for the different ethnic family foods⁷¹ they might bring to school, find encouragement in a church community that welcomes and enjoys a variety of cuisines at a church potluck or communion table that holds “breads” from many cultures. In the same way, seeing young people, women pastors, or individuals with disabilities lead are powerful symbols of presence and participation denoting who is welcome and belongs, and who has voice to shape the culture of a church.⁷² Cultural identity and belonging intersect one’s understanding of being a disciple of Jesus and belonging to the family of God. Identity and belonging are continually and dynamically forming in and around self in relationship to others, God and the church.

⁷¹ In conversation with congregants, many Asian American students and adults share stories of parents providing school lunches which were tossed out because the student did not want to get teased, asked questions, or mocked for their foods. This might include kimchee, seaweed, or foods prepared with fish or fish oil, that have a particular “fishy” smell which many non-Asian people are not as accustomed too. Food is a powerful cultural identifier, and also the source of many children’s cultural barriers to belonging in a school lunchroom.

⁷² In an interview with second-generation Korean American pastor in Seattle, Aaron Cho shared how being connected to one’s history and immigrant story helps people not run away from their pain or past, but creates space for healing, wholeness and healthy relationships between a person and their own ethnic group, family, or community. Interview, April 10, 2016.

FORMATION OF A NEW MODEL: BELONG, BECOME, BELIEVE

Moving toward the intersection of spiritual and racial identity development of children, three conclusions are drawn from the exploration of race, ethnicity and identity: 1) external factors are influencing children's identity formation, 2) relationships with others are either forming through interconnectedness and interdependency, or fractured relationships with insider/outsider mentality and disconnectedness, and 3) a child's identity is what a child believes to be true about themselves based on external and internal influences, meaning how they see themselves and how others perceive them. This includes their experience of or ability to exert power⁷³ and agency⁷⁴ in their own story.

Embracing Ethnic Identity in Faith Formation

As ethnic and cultural identity form in our children, faith identity is also forming. Through participation in the church, through spiritual parenting, or through mentorship by other adults, children learn who God is, who they are as image bearers of God, and who they are called to become as faithful followers of Jesus. In a sense, a child's spiritual identity grows up inside of their cultural, racial, and ethnic identity. Because these identities are interconnected and intertwined, faith and race conversations should be ongoing in our homes and in our churches regardless of the demographic make-up of a particular church context. All children experience some level of diversity within their community, whether it be race, culture, gender, ability, socioeconomics, etc., which means all children

⁷³ By power, here I mean their ability to choose or have voice in their experience of their identity, to be able to participate and have say in the relationships they are in, and the spaces they occupy. Power for a child involves speaking their mind, telling their story, feeling safety, and being seen and heard in life-affirming ways.

⁷⁴ Agency in this context means a child has influence on the experiences and life situations they find themselves in. A child who experiences agency can determine, with the support of healthy adult relationships, what would be wise choices for themselves or what would help them experience safety, joy, loving relationships, or practice self-determination.

have an opportunity to experience belonging or exclusion and learn about the impact of that on their faith.

Spiritual formation for children begins first with identity and a sense of belonging in community (Rom 8:14-16). The gospel is rich with stories that indicate Jesus' love and attention to children, putting them at the center of ministry in the kingdom of God (Matt 18:2-5, Matt 19:13-14, Mark 9:36-37, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 9:47-48, Luke 18:16-17).

Regarding faith, it is not developmentally appropriate to suggest that a child belongs to Christian community only after they have come to subscribe to (believe), and are able to live out (become), a set of beliefs and practices that, theoretically, will not fully develop until adolescence.⁷⁵ Instead, we welcome children into the family of God as recipients of God's grace, as exemplars of faith, and as marks of the kingdom.⁷⁶ Learning from adult reflections on childhood, we discover that children internally ask, *Do I feel as if I belong? Do I see others who look like me? If I share my story will anyone else get it, agree, or understand? Do I matter in this place, is my voice heard? Do I have anything I want to add to this conversation, experience, or group of people?* These are fundamentally questions about

⁷⁵ 1981, James Fowler developed six stages of faith and the Faith Development Theory. In this theory, preschool age children are in the Intuitive-Projective stage of faith. Their ideas about God are formed by the people around them, namely parents and the social context they are in. Elementary age students are in Mythical-Literal stage of faith which involves understanding faith logically. Students at this stage are influenced by family, social context and the faith institution they are a part of. They often believe what they church tells them to believe. By adolescence it is possible to experience the Synthetic-Conventional stage where faith beliefs become set and a person identifies with a particular set of beliefs and practices, most often the set of beliefs that they have grown up with. Based off this framework alone, we can see a child's faith formation is informed by parents' faith and the environment one is surrounded by. As the child ages, the doctrine and theology of the church that is forming them, will be instrumental in shaping a child's faith that will be the foundation for the belief system that becomes more set/solidified in teenage and early adulthood years.
www.psychologycharts.com/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html, 4/16/2018.

⁷⁶ Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom and David D. Bjorlin write in *Incorporating Children in Worship: Mark of the Kingdom* that "[C]hildren embody the very heart of Jesus' message in which care for the poor [and least of these] is a distinctive mark of the advancement of God's kingdom" (5).

voice, presence, and participation. While these questions manifest throughout childhood, they come to center stage as children transition from childhood to adolescence.⁷⁷

A new framework for children's ministry takes into consideration both spiritual development and cultural (identity) development through the lens of race and ethnicity, and is enacted by the church community as a new narrative and way of understanding and doing ministry with children.⁷⁸

Belong.

Become.

Believe.

Children are invited to belong (in faith community), become (a process of transformation as one who is in Christ and a part of the family of God), and believe (develop a set of faith beliefs rooted in the holistic Gospel of Jesus Christ). This new framework for children's ministry seeks to affirm the unique identity and story of every child, to give children and families language and actions to embody racial justice in their communities, to provide a children's ministry theology of justice and reconciliation, and to give voice to young people as active members of the Kingdom of God to lead the church forward.

⁷⁷ Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1959) outlines 8 stages of development, the first five happening up to adolescents. In each stage, a type of crisis is experienced that shapes the development of a child. The basic virtues in order from one to five are Hope (Trust vs. Mistrust), Will (Autonomy vs. Shame), Purpose (Initiative vs. Guilt), Competency (Industry vs. Inferiority), Fidelity (Identity vs. Role Confusion). Within this development grid there is a heavy emphasis on personal, individualistic development and establishing autonomy, agency, and purpose. It could be argued that identity development is constantly forming in the early stages, but becomes heightened and the focus in adolescents. This theory is consistent with Fowler's faith development theory, recognizing that youth are coming into their set of beliefs and becoming more rooted in their identity.

⁷⁸ Drawing on the work of Beckwith and Csinos from above, many churches and ministry leaders are seeking new ways to connect men, women, and children to an active and vibrant faith life. Rather than seeking out what's new, relevant, on trend in culture, or the latest fad (i.e. missional communities or "social justice clubs") in Christian culture, what if our churches were able to recognize how God's love and justice disrupt systems of injustice and exclusion in our churches and communities and see new way of acting that model radical love and care for neighbor across race, class, gender, and ability lines.

Building a Framework that Affirms Children’s Identity

Imagine a church where children are fully welcomed into the family of God from infancy or from the moment they walk through the church doors. Imagine a church that sees the *Imago Dei* (Image of God) in children, no matter their ethnicity, age, gender, ability, family story, or socio-economic background. While we may believe this theologically, our practices in worship speak louder than our ideology or beliefs. In fact, if the practices do not line up with our beliefs, than is it possible we are being dishonest about what we really believe? There are always cultural biases and assumptions that are ignored and go unaddressed. Even as we imagine new possibilities for our churches, there still exists the tension of current realities.

In many ways, children are ostracized, marginalized, trivialized and excluded by well-meaning Christians who are waiting for children to “grow up” so they can fully belong in the church. Several examples are noted here as points of reflection for congregations seeking to incorporate children more fully into the worshipping body of the church.

- Children might be welcomed into the church, but do they have voice or say in how the church expresses itself in worship?
- Children might be welcomed into adult worship services, but are they expected to behave like adults or like children?⁷⁹
- Children might participate in Christian education, but are they only in classes to be instructed, or is there a place for their insights and wisdom to be shared?
- Children might be allowed to participate in worship services - reading Scripture, singing in choir, etc. - but is the commentary empowering, or do they simply hear, “That’s so cute”?
- How old should a child be to be a voting member of a congregation?
- Do we see children as the “church of the future” or “the church of today,” and how does that view shape what we expect of children?

⁷⁹ Kids are to be seen and not heard.

Reflecting on these questions give insights into the beliefs of our churches and reveal implicit bias around age, gender, ethnicity, and ability in children.

With regards to cultural differences amongst mono-ethnic churches, the experience of the child in the church will vary in predominantly Black churches, white churches, or Asian American churches, for example. The cultural histories and realities that shape those congregations both create particular expressions of belonging for children and also include potential barriers to belonging. Cultural faith practices may articulate certain expectations of children and youth- in how they speak, listen, receive exhortation, and contribute to the congregation in meaningful ways. For example, often in the Black church, it is common that the children are present in worship services, but they are expected to be silent. In other contexts, to have children in an adult worship service is either unacceptable (in which children are relegated to children's church or a family room), or contrary, the cacophony of childish noises are expected and meant to be delighted in as a reminder of God's love revealed through the child. This thesis names the general tensions that lie at the root of children's presence in our congregations but is mindful of the nuanced ways that children are received, seen, loved and shepherded in different contexts.

Children live in a racialized world. Race and racism are not just words and concepts but things that are lived out in particular ways in daily life. Jennifer Harvey describes in *Raising White Kids* how parents of children of color have to teach their children about race as a "basic matter of survival"⁸⁰ and an everyday lived experience while white parents (in addition to having the freedom to opt out of race conversations) are either 1) not having them because they are not comfortable, 2) are having poor quality conversations, or 3) are not

⁸⁰ Jennifer Harvey, *Raising White Kids*, 8-9.

aware of the need for conversation with white children on race matters.⁸¹ As another example, in the era of increased transracial adoption, conversations in the church on race can help families navigate the challenges of helping children form healthy racial/ethnic identity while acknowledging the ways that white Americans, and the church are complicit in racism that has created systems in which kids of color experience inequity regardless of the family they are raised by. Jennifer Harvey writes, “Color-blindness cannot teach children equity because it does not line up with how their brains actually function. They notice racial differences, and if we don’t interpret the meaning of those differences with and for them, society will.”⁸²

It is important for children to be aware of the daily “work” that race and ethnicity do in the world.⁸³ It is equally important that, as we give children context and understanding to those words, we deconstruct harmful narratives about race and encourage strong and healthy cultural/ethnic identity that provides young people with resilience and grit to face a world framed by systemic and structural racism. By approaching the conversation in a honest and holistic way, we will build up a generation that can dismantle the systems of injustice in ways that generations before have been unable to do. No one can do this better than the church. In simple terms we exude to children that Jesus loves and values them as they are

⁸¹ Harvey provides strategies to replace colorblind and diversity narratives to help parents and teachers of white children to develop race-conscious parenting styles that are not afraid to talk about race, identify and understand racism and seek to counter it with conversation and appropriate action, with a different set of tools and frameworks for understanding racial identity in children and pursuing racial justice for our world.

⁸² Harvey, *Raising White Kids*, 30.

⁸³ In our racialized society some children will experience an education system that will help them thrive, while others experience that same educational system which will reject and fail them. Some kids will walk around neighborhoods feeling safe and protected by local authorities, others will walk around knowing the need to watch their back and lack the security of knowing local authorities would protect them at all costs. Some kids will experience microaggressions that can be described as “a thousand tiny papercuts”; little comments about the shape of their eyes or the color of their skin, or the texture of their hair or the way they speak, or the food they bring to school. These comments may be small, but when compounded have a profound impact on mental, emotional, spiritual and even physical well being for people of color. Most students who are white, will walk through life unaware of the privileges associated with the color of their skin because their whiteness is virtually invisible due to systems and social constructs of race that have made whiteness the norm.

(Mark 10:14-15), that we are invited to love God and love our neighbors as our selves (Luke 10:25-37), and that the ways in which we treat others, is actually the way we treat Jesus (Matt 25:31-46).

By deconstructing the concept of race and disrupting racial injustice, we can dismantle the power they hold over a child and the way a child will see themselves and others. For the child who experiences privilege in our racialized society, the awareness of how race is socially constructed has the power to bring cultural sensitivity to that child's future behaviors and relationships. This can be experienced by empathetic listening to others through story. For the child whose shoulders carry the oppressed systems of injustice, the knowledge of these social constructs can empower them to resist, disrupt, and reclaim their identity, giving them voice amidst systems that are against them. And just the act of honest acknowledgement by the privileged can make those victimized by racism know that they are not alone and that they have allies. The aim is not to make everyone the same or to dismiss the realities of difference and ethnic/cultural diversity that make our world more rich and meaningful, but to change the narrative about how difference works and what it looks like to dismantle systems of injustice.

We look to Jesus who radically modeled for us what it looks like to embrace our identity, to see the full humanity of others, and to create space for all to participate in meaningful relationship with the Creator, with creation, and with community. Our experience of God as expressed through the Trinity teaches us about community and wholeness through interdependence on one another. The Israelite's story reveals God's never-ending covenant love that seeks the welfare of the vulnerable, orphan, widow, refugee, foreigner, and stranger among us (Exod 22:21-24, Deut 10:18, 14:28-29, 27:19). Jesus modeled this love and

community through self-sacrifice, breaking barriers and religious boundaries, ignoring gender norms, and passionately preaching love and justice. Citing the work of Marcia Bunge in *Incorporating Children*, we see the gift of children in Christian community as demonstrated in the gospel of Mark where “the most vulnerable thrive, the least powerful are valued, and disciples live in radical solidarity with one another...as part of new life in Christ.”⁸⁴

The Danger of Colorblindness

In addition to addressing the way that race and ethnicity do work in a child’s life and the essential element of cultural identity and belonging in spiritual formation, this new framework of “belong, become, believe” for children’s ministry is a counter-narrative to colorblindness. Colorblindness in the church declares that we should not see the color of a person’s skin or acknowledge race. This type of feeble theology does not take into account the way that race and cultural identity is shaped within people from the time they are born. It does not account for the reality that society has assigned meaning to the differences in skin color which have decreed white bodies as greater than and brown or darker-skinned bodies as less than.⁸⁵ If we want to change this systemic sin of racism, we have to see it and name it. Colorblind theology does not account for our physical bodies. It ignores that God formed us and breathed life into our flesh and bones and called us “good”.

Colorblind theology does not take into account the stories of race and racism that have been woven into relationships, social contexts, and life experiences, and the ways that whiteness saturates society and churches at large. Our church cultures and social norms dictate who is included and who is excluded, who is allowed power and privilege and who is

⁸⁴ Clifton-Soderstrom and Bjorlin, *Incorporating Children*, 15.

⁸⁵ David Leong, *Race and Place: How Urban Geography Shapes the Journey to Reconciliation*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 40-41.

marginalized or rendered invisible and powerless in society and the church. The western, white evangelical Christian community has been blinded by the comforts of homogeneity, seeking the securities of sameness and familiarity, requiring assimilation for those who are not white, and have not accounted for bias, prejudice, and world-views about others that have been shaped by particular people, places and stories.⁸⁶

This new children's ministry framework creates space for us to live into a new idea: Belong, become, believe. It says you are welcome to come as you are (body, mind, spirit) and in the midst of doing Christian life together we will be transformed into the likeness of Christ in community (2 Cor 3:18), through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:1-6). So next we examine the theology that informs this new ministry framework.

A THEOLOGY OF BELONG, BECOME, BELIEVE

A new framework for children and family ministry is anchored in specific doctrinal beliefs and theology that address who God is, who we are, and how we are called to live. We come to understand this by exploring themes of identity, trinity, ecclesiology, and witness. We believe that all people are created in the *Imago Dei* (Gen 2:7), bearing the beauty and diversity of who God is. We believe that all people are created for community and created to be in right relationship with God and one another (Matt 22:37-39). Through faith in Jesus we become adopted sons and daughters (Rom 8:15, 8:23, 9:4, Gal 4:5, and Eph 1:5,) and the household of God (1 Pe 4:17). We are a people called to be set apart with and for the one true

⁸⁶ Because of the realities of racism in the church, much could be expanded on regarding the important place of ethnic specific churches for ethnic minority people and communities. This thesis does not intend to limit the significance of formation that happens for children and adults in these congregations, but to address the larger problematic elements of exclusion from belonging that is experience by many different types of people in dominant culture churches.

God (Exodus 19:5-6), and we are called to bear witness to God's love and justice and pursue shalom for all people in the world (Isaiah 1:17).

The Imago Dei: Finding our Identity in Christ

As a Church, we believe in one God, expressed through three distinct persons, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This mysterious three-in-oneness is God's triune nature, present at the beginning of creation; co-eternal and co-equal. To be in relationship with the Trinitarian God means participation, communion, and presence with the Creator of the universe. Jesus Christ the Son of God is *Messiah*- the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and promises of God to the Israelites. Jesus is also *Immanuel*- God with us, fully human and fully divine. Theologian Kathryn Tanner describes Christ as the key to the *Imago Dei*- that we are not simply made in the image of God, but that we bear God's image when we, by grace through faith are bound to God in Christ. "[T]here is only one perfect or express image of God- the second person of the trinity- and that perfect image becomes the creature's own by way of a close relationship with it...a closeness consummated in Christ..."⁸⁷ We are justified and sanctified as we become attached to Christ, and born again in our new identity with the Word and Spirit.⁸⁸ Tanner identifies the importance of the presence of God, participation in God, and desire for God as that which re-orientes our life, our words and our actions.⁸⁹ Our identity is found in Christ. Faith formation is a process of belonging in Christian community, becoming and establishing faith beliefs rooted in identity in Christ that embraces all of who we are.

⁸⁷ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14.

⁸⁸ Tanner, "Grace Part One" in *Christ the Key*, 58-105.

⁸⁹ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 127.

The Triune God: Created for Community

Jesus' birth and life are a pronouncement of God with us, an invitation to participate in life with Christ. As the incarnate God, Jesus was drawing everything into himself throughout his life. He was born in a particular time with a bodily and lived experience, as an ethnically Jewish male in an oppressive Roman Empire, but his identity also transcends time. Theologian M. Shawn Copeland refers to the work of Jesus in flesh and spirit as "embodied spirituality." She writes:

His incarnation witnesses to a divine destiny seeded in our very flesh. Jesus signifies and teaches a new way of being human, of embodied spirituality. Through his body marked, made individual, particular, and vivid through race, gender, sexuality, religious practice, and culture, Jesus mediates the gracious gift given and the gracious giving gift... Through his body, his flesh and blood, Jesus of Nazareth offers us a new and compelling way of being God's people even as we reside in the new imperial order.⁹⁰

In this compelling description of who Jesus is, we are reminded that Jesus meets each person where they are. Reading the New Testament we see that Jesus touched the sick, gave life and hope to those on the margins, and upturned structures of injustice. God sent Jesus to this earth to show us how to live, to teach us how to be holy, to invite us to confession, repentance, and to offer forgiveness. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict and compel us, to help us see and experience God's love, and to be transformed in God's image, remembering that salvation in Christ is not just for the individual, but that whole communities would become places of Christian love, justice and peace. God's redemption is not only for humanity, but for all of creation (Rev 21:1-5).

⁹⁰ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 65.

Ecclesiology: Being the Family of God

As sons and daughters of God, we are called to live in particular ways that allow for the flourishing of all people. This flourishing is best described by the Hebrew word *shalom*, which means wholeness, peace and completeness (Gen 43:27, Exod 4:18, 1 Kgs 5:12, Ps 122:6, Jer 29:7). For the family of God to experience shalom, we must participate in the liberation of all our brothers and sisters. Oppressed peoples are not free, and free people are not truly free until our oppressed neighbors are also free. Mujerista theologian, Ada María Isasi-Díaz notes liberation as a key theme in Latina theology. As she addresses individual sin and systemic sin and God's redemptive work, she repeatedly says, "La vida es la lucha" (the struggle is life).⁹¹ It is in a community that practices mutuality,⁹² solidarity and addresses power, difference, and injustice, where liberation is found. Isasi-Díaz writes,

From a Christian perspective the goal of solidarity is to participate in the ongoing process of liberation through which we Christians become a significantly positive force in the unfolding "kin-dom" of God. At the center of the unfolding of the kin-dom is the salvific act of God. Salvation and liberation are interconnected...salvation is worked out through the love between God and each human being and among human beings. Therefore, love sets in motion and sustains the ongoing act of God's salvation in which each person necessarily participates.⁹³

Isasi-Díaz describes a horizontal and vertical salvation image. Our salvation as both reconciliation with God (horizontal) and right relationships with others (vertical). It is God's love and justice that models this for us. As we encounter God - in Scripture and by the power

⁹¹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, (Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 27.

⁹² "true sharing of power leads to mutuality...[and] mutuality asks us to give serious consideration to what the other is saying, not only to respect it but to be willing to accept it as good for all," (Isasi-Díaz, 19)

⁹³ Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 89.

of the Spirit - the family of God can see how we are called to live. God's never-ending compassion and love are made known. The Hebrew word, *hesed* (used 248 times in Scripture) can be defined as God's loving kindness for humankind, and was also used to describe God's love for God's people, the Israelites. As we reflect the image of God into the world, we are compelled to offer this loving kindness to those around us. God is also a fierce defender of justice (Isa 51:4, 56:1-8, 58:1-14). Justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tzedakah*) go hand in hand in Scripture, demonstrated through God's love and care for the orphan, the widow and the foreigner (Exod 22:22, Deut 10:18, 27:19, Ps 68:5, 82:3, 146:9, Isa 1:17, Jer 22:3, Zech 7:9-10, Matt 25:40, Heb 13:1-3). *Mishpat* is justice that treats people equitably and takes up the cause of the orphan, widow, the immigrant, poor and vulnerable among us. *Tzedakah* is the idea of righteousness or right relationships lived out daily among family and society that enacts fairness and generosity toward others. Our salvation is enacted as we participate in this kingdom love and justice with God. In children's ministry we must have thoughtful interpretation of the Word, and openness to the revelation and inspiration of the Holy Spirit to guide our discipleship of children so they can embody this kind of love and justice as well.

In God's kingdom there is room for diverse community, a rich mosaic of cultures, ethnicities, and experiences that put God's love and creativity on display. As we live out our cultural and ethnic identities and faith beliefs through practice, in God's Kingdom economy we are invited to actively pursue racial justice and equity, advocate for the rights of all people to be full image bearers of God and co-equal participants in the Kingdom of God. We must embody lifestyles of advocacy and action in our world that move us toward

reconciliation with God and one another through practices of compassion, justice, and radical hospitality.

- We are called to be a faithful, worshipping community, acting with God to usher in God's love, justice, and shalom for the flourishing and wholeness of all people.
- We are called to care for our homeless neighbor, to advocate for equity in our school systems, to make sure that everyone in our communities has equal access to affordable and healthy food, fair housing, jobs, and healthcare.
- We are invited to vote on policies and spend money in ways that support people over corporations.
- We are invited to protest and speak out against injustices in our communities and advocate for the immigrant, the refugee and those who are experiencing poverty.

This is not an option, but an opportunity as the people of God to represent God's love for the world. God knits this community together, our gifts and talents, interweaving our stories and experiences. This faithful living must include the presence and participation of children as part of the body of Christ and family of God.

Witness: Presence and Participation in the Kingdom of God

The Church is called to turn to the world where Christ and the Spirit are already present and active. We are sent with the great commission: to preach and teach the good news of Jesus Christ, to proclaim God's love and forgiveness, to baptize new believers, to participate in the liberation of peoples from systemic and personal sin, to announce the signs and wonders of God and to announce the reign of God to the world.⁹⁴ Because of sin, the world is a broken, fragmented reflection of who God is, but the Kingdom of God is present through Jesus and the Church (Luke 17:20-21). The Church models hope for the world when it recognizes the need to lament, repent and seek reparations for the brokenness and injustice in the world that the church has participated in. Even in the midst of the brokenness of the

⁹⁴ Commission texts are found in all four Gospels: Matt 28:16-20, Mark 16:14-20, Luke 24:44-49, John 20:19-23.

Church, it is the instantiation of the Kingdom. Christ's second coming, the *parousia* or arrival of God, will bring about the fullness of God's Kingdom for all of eternity and the promise that all things will be restored and made new.

Theologian Willie James Jennings invites the church to reconsider how we interpret our place in the family God, that which is made up of Jews and gentiles. Understanding contemporary Christians as gentiles helps us read Scripture in ways that reveal how God created entrances into the people of God for those who would have been considered outside the boundaries of relationship. "Those Near Belonging" in *The Christian Imagination* is a chapter dedicated to understanding this relationship between Jesus, Israel and the Church today. Jesus redefines God's covenant with Israel as he re-orders the "kinship structure" around himself and redraws the borders of belonging, and draws a new communion and a re-birth of Israel in him.⁹⁵

Imagine a people defined by their cultural differences yet who turn their histories and cultural logics toward a new determination, a new social performance of identity. In so doing, they enfold the old cultural logics and practices inside the new ones of others, and they enfold the cultural logics and practices of others inside their own. This mutual enfolding promises cultural continuity measured only by the desire of belonging. Thus the words and ways of one people join those of another, and another, each born anew in a community seeking to love and honor those in its midst.⁹⁶

Based on an understanding that Israel and the church are both witnesses of who God is in the world, Jennings imagines community in a new way that is helpful for the church to

⁹⁵ Willie James Jennings, *Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 263-264.

⁹⁶ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 273-274.

consider as we recognize the significance of racial, ethnic, and other types of difference in the church today.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR BELONG, BECOME, BELIEVE MODEL

This work on children’s spiritual and racial identity formation is built on the principle that children’s ministry is at its best when it is local, storied, and connected. In the context of church ministry, ministry to children will always flow from the context, theology, and practices of the congregation it is a part of.⁹⁷ This new children’s ministry framework: “Belong, Become, Believe” will be referred to as the B³ Model from this point forward. It is written as one possible expression of an alternative way to do children’s ministry that centers God’s love and justice in our children’s discipleship and offers churches a way forward in racial justice and faith conversations that many children’s leaders and parents are longing for.

Place, Theology, and Practice

Every church has a place. It has a location and a context within a particular community or neighborhood of people that attend or do not attend the church.⁹⁸ The children’s ministry fits inside a larger church setting and usually functions with a certain type of vision and environment. The environment is the physical space and how it looks, but environment is also the people who are there, how they engage one another, and who feels seen, welcomed, and represented. The environment is important to be aware of as it impacts who feels like they belong and sees themselves as part of the community.

⁹⁷ In the para-church setting, ministry to kids stems from the parent organization that runs it.

⁹⁸ For further exploration of the understanding of the theology of place and its implications in our understanding of God’s mission, racial righteousness and our journey as reconciled peoples, read *Race and Place: How Urban Geography Shapes the Journey to Reconciliation* by David Leong, and *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, by Willie James Jennings.

Second, every church teaches particular theology. This theology states what the church believes about who God is and who they are as the people of God. It is theology that brings knowledge but also shapes practices which ask, “How do we live out faith in this God?” Theology and faith beliefs are communicated to the worshipping community through words and actions, what is taught in sermons, or Sunday school classes, small group ministries, and is also dependent on who is present.⁹⁹ In children’s ministry, theology is expressed through content of curriculum, content of instruction or play in worship, images on walls and in Bibles, content and images in media presentations, and theology modeled through the practices of the church, such as prayer, sacraments, musical worship, liturgy, and Scripture.

Third, each church has specific practices they embody and do together as a worshipping community. Dominant theological messages get communicated through worship services, preaching, liturgy, and missional practices, but also in relationships. In children’s ministry practices are embodied in a certain *structure*. The structure holds people, practices, and expectations that get acted out. For example: Who is the teacher, or student? Who has voice? Whose stories are represented/visualized/imagined in this context? In summary, every church has a particular *place, theology and practices*. In addition, every children’s ministry has a particular *environment, content, and structure*. Each are vital considerations in the B³ Model that weave together children’s spiritual and racial identity formation.

In the B³ Model themes of belonging, becoming and believing can also be understood as stages as long as they are seen as cyclical not linear. A child at a young age is seeking to belong in community. As a child experiences belonging, their involvement and practices,

⁹⁹ A church might reflect on these questions: Is the congregation multi-generational? Who is in leadership? What type of diversity is present- age, gender, race, class, ability, etc.?

language and behaviors are the process of ‘becoming like’ that takes place. As a child is shaped by certain practices and language and ways of being, they get entrenched in those things and specific beliefs begin to take root. A child may come to believe particular things about who they are and who God or who Jesus is. Sometimes we hear stories of children with great faith (beliefs) before they even know or understand who God is. As a child’s beliefs are taking root, they continue to grow, change and develop. In adolescence they encounter a new stage of identity and different experience of belonging. A new sense of belonging might incite new transformative experiences and deeper or more mature beliefs. The B³ Model necessitates flexibility and imagination.

PART THREE:
B³ MODEL: BELONG, BECOME, BELIEVE
CHILDREN'S MINISTRY FRAMEWORK

BELONG

The first theme, Belong, is really about identity, and understanding who God is and who we are. Belonging is essential. In Acts 6, we meet the Hellenist Jews who became followers of the Jesus way in the early church. While the early church was a diverse group of believers (economically, socially, and ethnically), the Hellenist Jews were an ethnic minority who found themselves on the outside of the church community. They were not getting their equitable share of the resources being distributed among the church. When this was realized, the disciples wisely instructed the church to restructure its leadership to include those on the margins and address the distribution inequities. In this story, we see how value is demonstrated not just with words, but with actions, demonstrating love of God through love of neighbor.

Children at the Center of the Kingdom

In Mark 9, we read the story of Jesus drawing children to himself and teaching his disciples, “whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:35-37). Jesus both gathers the children in his arms, as a sign of belonging, and also blesses them which is a sign of their ‘sentness’ as the people of God. In God’s Kingdom, creating space for all people to belong - children, women, men, those on the margins, those with power and the powerless - is central to our experience of the fullness of who God is. In reading the gospels and stories of Jesus’ ministry, we see that Jesus does not simply invite people into belonging, but he centers his Kingdom vision around women, children, orphans, widows, those who are sick, marginalized communities, and the oppressed.

From Jesus' example, we see how belonging requires justice, equity, and interdependence. Jesus shows us a new narrative of belonging and empowers the powerless as his representatives and uplifts them as central to the Kingdom of God. In this new narrative, connection is critical. Jesus desires that people see their whole selves in this kingdom. We integrate children in the worshipping life of the church not just to manage generational differences but to more fully realize and participate in Trinitarian and incarnational life.¹⁰⁰ Students bring their whole selves to church and Christian community. How can we affirm their value, worth, and place each time they encounter God through Scripture and relationships in the church? Returning to the story of creation, we need a renewed imagination for the way God created us for relationship, and in particular a new vision for the role that children play in this divine community.

Children are Created for Relationships

Children have inherent value in God's Kingdom (Ps 10:14) and children belong to God (Ps 139:13-16, Hos 1:10). What would the church be missing if children were not present?¹⁰¹ Children delight in the wonder and mystery of God, they remind us of God's delight in play,¹⁰² and they have an ability to teach adults about what it means to participate in loving relationship with God. In Scripture we see how Miriam showed courage and bravery in following her brother Moses down the river (Exod 2:4-8). Samuel demonstrated

¹⁰⁰ "Kid culture is a part of church culture so it should inform us as adults," Katherine Douglass, Lecture, THEO 6730 Foundations of Student and Family Ministry, (Session 6, November 6, 2017).

¹⁰¹ This is the question I explored in the context of a study on cultural identity and belonging in the church. Through Scripture study, in theological study of children's spiritual formation, and within the context of experiencing children's ministry in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural church, I have discovered several key ways that children move us toward a more holistic Kingdom vision of belonging than would exist if children were not present.

¹⁰² This is the premise behind a popular curriculum in religious education called "Godly Play", created by Jerome Berryman who based his technique on the biblical scholarly work of Sofia Cavalleti and Montessori teaching method. Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995).

what it looks like to listen and respond to God (1 Sam 3). The boy with five loaves of bread and two fish revealed a spirit of radical generosity when a large crowd was faced with hunger (John 6:9). Children are initiated into covenant with God through circumcision in the Old Testament (Gen 17:12) and baptism in New Testament and the church today (Matt 28:19, Mark 16:16, John 3:5). In addition to faith, children model genuine friendship without agenda and an ability to welcome the stranger. Children can have an uninhibited response to the Spirit's prompting in worship.

Children Belong

As indispensable as children are to the church, they face many obstacles to full belonging in Christian community. In addition to gender and age bias, children's vulnerability is often seen as weakness instead of strength. Children's curiosity or enthusiasm can be seen as bothersome instead of enriching to community. Children are often labeled as disruptive, loud, or unable to conform to the norms that have been established in typical worship services. Pastors do not often preach with a child in mind as their congregant.¹⁰³ Complicating this reality is the knowledge that because of systemic racial injustice, in majority white church contexts, children of color are often labeled more quickly as disruptive, problematic unruly, or stereotypical tropes are played out that marginalize students. In any context, we must ask: What are the practices in Christian community that minister to and include children who are otherwise marginalized, dehumanized, or devalued by the church?

This is where connecting cultural identity and belonging is crucial. Children want to be loved and valued as they are - body, mind, spirit. Children want to be seen and called by

¹⁰³ This especially applies to students who fall outside typical developmental ranges, children with trauma backgrounds, children with disabilities, or children from hard places.

name. Children long for meaningful relationships with peers and adults and they love to engage in storytelling in community. Children's ministry has an influential opportunity to set a child-affirming stage for a life-long faith journey. Children discover who the characters are in their faith narrative - the relationships with God, self, family, and others. Children discover themselves in the story of God, find their place in Christian community, and draw connections between their faith and the world they live in. Relational based ministry models work for all types of children, because they create space for friendship, shared experiences, mentorship, and discipleship. In the context of relational ministry, children can explore individual and community identity; they can engage and participate in worship, Scripture, and faith exploration in particularly meaningful ways; and they can use their leadership, gifts and voice to practice and embody personal faith. This leads us to the exploration of our second stage of the B³ Model: Become.

BECOME

Becoming Like Jesus

As children experience belonging in Christian community, they are invited to become followers of Jesus. Becoming like Christ is a process of transformation which leads to new ways of thinking and being. It is not a "sinner's prayer" that transforms a child into a Christian. It is the recognition of the God of creation who sent Jesus to be God with us, and has gifted us with the power of the Holy Spirit so that we could become like Christ and experience restored and right relationship with God and one another. This process is not a one size fits all process, and while it might include a significant conversion experience, being a Christian it is more like a journey of transformation. Following the way of Jesus is not a one-time decision, but an on-going choice to recognize who one is and how God is inviting

one to live out their faith daily. Christian educator Elizabeth Caldwell writes in a book called *I Wonder*:

Do we tell parents that raising a child in the Christian faith is not just a short hike but rather a long journey? Do we explain to them that just as families like to retell favorite stories, so too Christians do this as well? We remember who we are and who is we are as we retell, recall, and remember biblical stories. These stories of identity and formation, these hard stories of loss and recovery, these stories of promise and hope told so long ago are still our stories as we hear them in contexts much different from those of the original audience.¹⁰⁴

In the church setting, practices, experiences and stories shape beliefs, behaviors and relationships in the same way that Scripture and theology shape faith. Children start to embody the stories and relationships that they read about, that are modeled for them, and that they are socialized for. Children enact the practices of their community. Think about a child who is just learning the game of soccer. They learn what to wear, what to eat and drink to give them energy to play, how to play the game, the rules of the sport, and their relationships on and off the field with teammates, coaches and audience. They are formed in the context of experiencing and living into the game of soccer. Faith is a similar experiential learning encounter. Children need to enact, explore and embody and learn the language of Christian faith in specific and tangible ways. They must try it out, practice it, test it, question it, and even experience doubt and wonder along the way.

¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth Caldwell, *I Wonder: Engaging a Child's Curiosity about the Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 33.

Becoming is Transformative

Imagine a group of children whose faith is built on the foundational truth that they are loved by God and made in the image of God - each and everyone - as they are. And imagine a church that invites children to belong by encouraging them to participate fully in worship through the rituals and liturgy, the singing of songs, the collection of offering, the reading of Scripture, the sharing of testimony, the reflection on Scripture, the prayers of the people, feasting together at the communion table, giving and receiving a blessing from the pastor or priest, serving the community with the whole church body, and being invited to share their gifts and talents. These children would become like Jesus through their enactment, through their practicing, through their wondering, exploration or creatively imaginative expression of this Christian faith. They would become like Jesus, as they read Scripture, as they worship responsively, and as they live out compassion, justice, and right living in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools.

There is a process of transformation happening in which the story of God and a child's identity become clearer, even as they become more intertwined. A child's sense of rootedness in their own story includes being a part of the priesthood of believers (1 Pet 2:9), the family of God (1 John 3:1); as they experience kinship with Jesus and with brothers and sisters in the Church (1 Cor 1:10, Matt 12:50). They experience the journey of transformation to fully live into the beliefs, rhythms, and practices of the church, as they live out this mission to participate with God in the now/not yet kingdom of God (Luke 17:21/Luke 21:31). This is children's ministry reimagined. These children would grow up in a church that says to them: "You belong. Become like Jesus, and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ who

came from heaven to earth - to be God with us, so that we might experience the fullness of who God is, and who we are called to be in Christ (Gal 3:27).”

BELIEVE

Settling Into Identity

Faith beliefs are forming, not solidified in childhood. The process of spiritual and identity formation that happens in childhood leads to beliefs about self, others and who God is. In understanding who God is, and who they are, they can more fully grasp how they are called to live. Just as a seed needs water, healthy soil, sun, oxygen, and nutrients, so the soul of a child needs to be nurtured. This spiritual nurture does not happen in isolation of their physical, relational, social or emotional development however. Rather there is integration and connection between these different facets of child development. For example, a child who experiences trauma and broken relationships will develop particular understandings of self, others, and God. Likewise, a child who experiences healthy relationships and physical or emotional safety will be shaped by how they experience the world and what others say about who they are in the world. The way children experience community and belonging gives them a particular lens to view the world, and tools to cope with what life offers them.

Belief means settling into a particular identity. This identity forms through interactions in daily life, through faith conversations that are authentic and organic, stemming from real-life situations and realities.¹⁰⁵Who a child believes themselves to be, and who they believe God is, will shape how they live and embody Christian faith in the world.¹⁰⁶Belief is a fruit then of the process of formation through discipleship. Discipleship is the means

¹⁰⁵ Kara Powell, *Sticky Faith Guide for your Family*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 134.

¹⁰⁶ Through this process of transformation and becoming beliefs are beginning to form and get fleshed out or worked on. Beliefs are squishy like clay initially. They get pressed, pulled, twisted and shaped over and over. Faith is tested, analyzed, questioned and consumed.

through which faith beliefs take root. In the context of discipleship kids develop meaningful relationships, grow in awareness of the “multi-ness” of the church and diversity in God’s kingdom, and come to develop their own faith beliefs apart from parents, mentors, and other spiritual leaders or guides. Kids find their purpose and place in the church.

Authentic community might look like a children’s ministry that commits itself to intentional healthy relationships between children and adults, where faith conversations that are not just instructional and lecture-based but conversational. These spaces should be interactive and leave room for mystery, doubts and questions to be explored. It is a ministry that practices the art of becoming and formation, that leads to rootedness in faith identity and beliefs. There is room for growth, change, adapting, and transformation. Becoming and believing go hand-in-hand, and in this non-linear development there is a back-and-forth or oscillation between the experiences of becoming and believing. It is hard to tell where one might start and the other might end.

A child’s understanding or awareness of their identity - ethnic, gender, social, and faith - has the ability to grow and impact their experience of discipleship as followers of Jesus. As young people begin to claim their faith in personal and individual ways, outside of upbringing, religion, or family tradition or parental influence - discipleship can be seen as a journey. It is not uncommon to hear youth share that their “faith became their own” in junior high, high school, or even college. What types of ministry to children can create environments where children see the importance of their developing faith and exploring or seeking to understand who God is, and how the world works, even in their younger years? What does it mean for a child to grasp that they are on a journey of discovering who God is

and who they are called to be - amidst the highs and lows, as they discover their personal identity and grasp the web of connections of people and systems that shape their life?

Children are constantly making meaning in their world and understanding their purpose and place in the world. The goal of the church is not to produce mini-adults in thinking and action; the goal of Christian worship is that for every person, from whatever place they find themselves, to be able to fully experience the love and grace of God as they are. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to empower, convict, and transform lives. It is the church's privilege and responsibility to be a place where children experience the welcoming presence of God in the mosaic kingdom of God. If the church takes its mission seriously, children can learn to recognize patterns of power and injustice in the world, confirm what is truth is, see and respond to injustice, learning to see and question what opposes the gospel and good news of Jesus.

Seeing in New Ways: The Enactment of Belong, Become, Believe

The B³ Model is a new children's ministry framework invites us to see God's Kingdom and children in new ways. The Gospel of John relies heavily on the idea that faith is about moving from blindness to sight and that being reborn in Christ gives us spiritual eyes to see in new ways. Daniel Hill uses this concept and imagery in his book *White Awake* describing his cultural identity journey, which he calls "the transformational metaphor of blindness to sight."¹⁰⁷ In God's Kingdom way of living, children are invited to see and belong in Christian community; children become new creations as transformed people, following Christ, which leads toward faith beliefs that are rooted in who God is. This way of being includes a malleable but affirming sense of identity, individually and communally, and

¹⁰⁷ Daniel Hill, *White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 22.

develops a set of beliefs that call children to a particular way of living in this world. This spiritual transformation in Christ is liberative and helps children become hospitable, generous, loving, kind, compassionate, empowered, caring, mindful, and inclusive. The B³ Model seeks to help kids see in new ways, to be transformed, and also affirm who each child is.

The B³ Model is built upon the idea that place, theology, and practices inform our ministry and our identity as Jesus followers gets formed in and through relationships in the church and Christian community. People want to be seen and known. Key to belonging in community is a thick praxis of presence, participation, and power. How we do ministry shapes children's relationships, identity, and experience of agency or power. A church might evaluate how kids are interacting with their peers, in intergenerational groups, or with Sunday school teachers and small group leaders. The church should be aware of the significance of ethnic/cultural representation in leadership.¹⁰⁸ Just as God invites us to participate in God's Kingdom work, so the church must invite children to participate in the life of the church. I would argue that proximity to power and a child's experience of agency is what will ultimately define their ability to see themselves as full participants in the church family. Children ask: Does my voice count? Drawing on experiences from family life, have you ever had a conversation with family members about what to eat for dinner, and the

¹⁰⁸ Two examples of representation stand out from my ministry experiences in recent years. A young Ethiopian girl who was adopted by a white family, has an Black Sunday school Leader. While she struggles with identity and trauma related to her past, she sees herself in that adult, and can imagine the possibility for herself. We see this in the way she connects with and responds to this leader. In another situation- a child at the church declared one day about the Lead Pastor- "*Wait? He's a pastor? I thought only girls could be pastors?*" While he had been formed in a church that supports men and women in full leadership in the church, his mother is a pastor. Perhaps this is an impossible scenario for churches that do not have female pastors or support women in ministry, but imagine how empowering for our young women and boys to envision the possibilities for themselves in ministry as we disrupt the narrative of toxic masculinity, male dominance in leadership in the church.

youngest child's opinion is either not given space to be heard, or is always dismissed?

Imagine how frustrating that would be for the child, even if they were given an opportunity to speak. What does it feel like to always be denied access to be a decision maker in the family unit?

The B³ Model creates space for students to be mentored into leadership, given space to practice sharing their testimony, given space to pray for others, and be empowered to serve. As students discover a sense of agency - an ability to share their gifts and voice in the community - there is this cyclical movement that helps establish relationships and affirm identity. Relationships, identity, and power are not isolated encounters but interwoven experiences that shape a child's understanding of God, self, and Christian community. Faith formation is a process of belonging, becoming and believing, rooted in identity in Christ that embraces all of who we are.

CONCLUSION

The B³ Models seeks to give children a rooted identity in Christ that affirms their whole being. Through robust theology and meaningful practices children can know the love of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is my hope that all children would know that God created them with power, purpose, a sense of agency, and significance in the family of God. I envision a community of children who understand the significance of Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection, and feel empowered to embody life fully as they are and as followers of Jesus, full of God's reconciling and restorative love and justice. I envision a children's ministry full of parents, students, mentors and disciples who are grounded and practicing compassion, justice, and reconciliation.

The B3 Model is children's ministry framework centered on the three themes of "belong, become, believe," building towards a holistic vision of discipleship and diversity in multi-ethnic children's ministry. It aims to equip the church with theological perspectives on children's faith formation and racial/ethnic identity formation, and identify ministry practices that create space for students to experience the transforming love of Christ within the framework of a healthy developing cultural identity and sense of belonging in Christian community. This intersectional work will be ongoing and dynamic as it is intended for instructing a children and family ministry program but also for outlining a theological framework and ministry philosophy that impacts the whole church body.

There are many ways this thesis only briefly addresses topics and themes that are inherently connected to a vision of a multi-ethnic and diverse children's ministry. More time could have been spent understanding the place of children in worship, the impact of biracial and mixed race families, or the need for racial justice education and training around trans-racial adoption and the foster care system. Also important to address is the formation of adults who teach and disciple children. What is their understanding of race and racism, and of their own cultural identity? Future research should be done to develop curriculum that fits the B³ Model of ministry, training for youth and adults serving in children's ministry, and studies examining the long-term impact on child faith formation in this new model. I anticipate further growth as we reframe children's faith formation and discipleship around the narrative of cultural identity and belonging. My hope is this will influence the church's theology and practices and cause us to embrace diverse, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural expressions of children's ministry that embody God's love, justice, and restoration for all of creation.

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