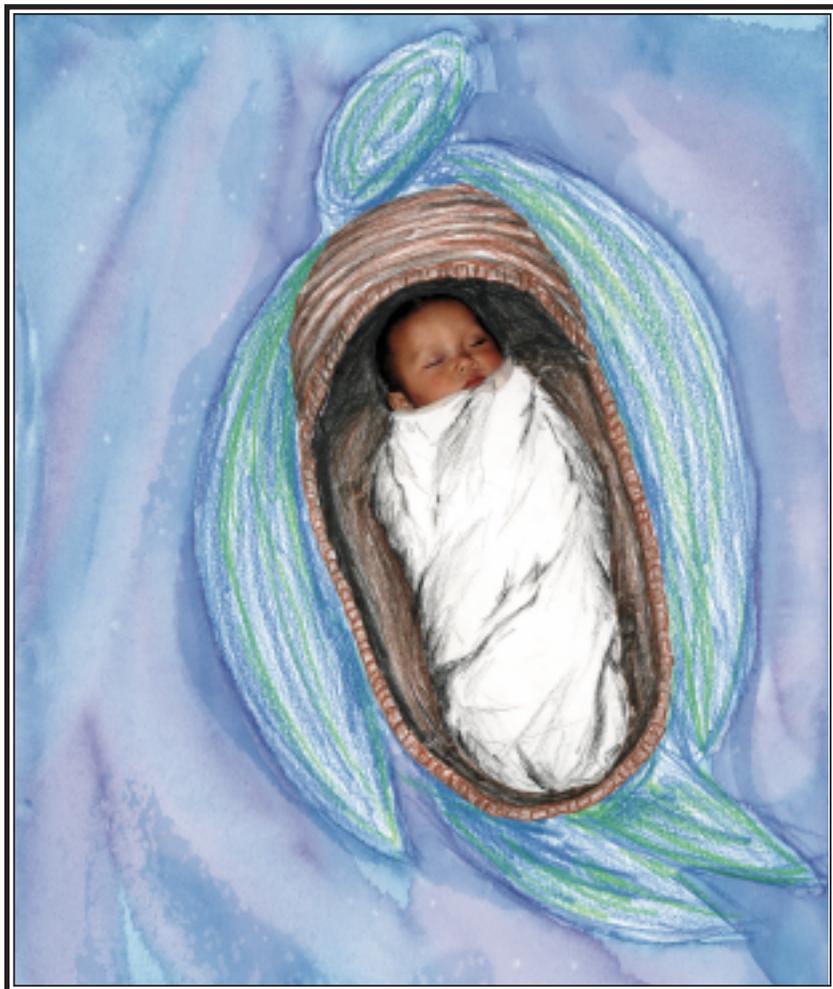


ALL GOD'S CHILDREN

INSIGHTS

The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary



SPRING 2002

NELSON • GARLAND • THOMPSON • REID • COUTURE • WILLIAMS
MENDENHALL • ALSUP • DEARMAN • UNDERWOOD • JENSEN

INSIGHTS

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COVER: "Held in the Arms of God," Laura Boston, mixed media, from *Celebrating the Year of the Child: Monthly Reflections and Activities for Individuals, Groups, and Families*, by Lib Caldwell and Cathy Caldwell Hoop, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Congregational Ministries Division, Mission Interpretation and Promotion, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202, October. Used by permission.

"This painting / sketch depicts the Scripture in Exodus 2:1-10. The passage tells of how God protected Moses from harm. Moses probably knew nothing of the dangers around him, but I'm sure he saw the fear in his mother's eyes. She knew he would be killed as the firstborn son of a Hebrew. It is funny that the problem and the solution of the situation came from the same family. Pharaoh was the one to order that each firstborn of a Jew be killed, but his daughter was the one to take Moses in and care for him as her own child. I think there are two ways I can relate to this story. First, that God definitely surrounds me and protects me; also, that he has this wonderful plan for me that I couldn't ever come up with."

—Laura Boston, 15, Wayne Presbyterian Church, St. Davids, Pennsylvania

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CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

PAYING ATTENTION, PARENTING, AND PRAYER

David H. Jensen

In April 2001, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary sponsored a conference with the Synod of the Sun and the Presbyterian Children's Homes focusing on the church and its ministry with children at risk. This edition of *Insights* contains several papers which were presented at the conference; I believe you will find the articles to be informative and challenging.

The lead article in this spring issue serves as a fundamental and complementary piece to the others. It centers on the important roles of the local congregation and the family in initiating and shaping the religious learning and behavior of children. Written by the renowned author, teacher, and Christian educator C. Ellis Nelson, "Reforming Childish Religion" sets forth definitive guidance for congregations and parents based upon research focused on when and how children learn basic religious practices and beliefs.

One of the most important findings of the research, Nelson points out, is the critical role that families—and in particular, parents—play in this process. Indeed, Nelson argues that church leaders need to realize "that family life is the most influential factor in the formation, interpretation, and support of children's faith in God." Congregations, therefore, should provide ongoing education, personal support, and appropriate materials for parents and for other adults who serve as "teachers of the faith" for their own children and for all children they know or see in need.

Robert M. Shelton
President

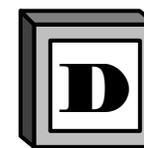


REFORMING CHILDISH RELIGION

C. ELLIS NELSON

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9



uring the recent past there has been an enormous expansion of knowledge about the way children learn and how what they learn relates to their personal development. My review of this research has left me with two conclusions of importance to church leaders. One is that very little research contradicts the process by which children form an image of God as described in the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9). The other conclusion is that the implications of recent research about children's learning linked with the wisdom of the Shema is ignored by most mainstream Protestant churches. In truth, the most important influence in the formation of children's belief in God is their relation to parents and the prac-

C. Ellis Nelson is research professor in Christian education at Austin Seminary. With degrees from Austin College, Austin Seminary, the University of Texas, and Columbia University, Nelson has taught on the faculties of Union Theological Seminary, Louisville Theological Seminary, San Francisco Theological Seminary, and the University of Dubuque. He is the author of How Faith Matures (John Knox Press, 1989), Helping Teenagers Grow Morally: A Guide for Adults (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), and Growth in Grace and Knowledge (Nortex Press, 1992). He is the recipient of several honors including the 1992 Educator of the Year award from the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators and the 1998 Award for Excellence in Theological Education. Austin Seminary's newest endowed faculty chair in Christian education is named in honor of C. Ellis Nelson and his wife, Nancy Gribble Nelson.

tice of religion in the home. For this influence to be theologically mature, parents and other adults must participate in a congregation that is seeking to know the mind of Christ, an activity of study and practice that engages adults as well as children and youth.

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

In general terms, contemporary research indicates that infants begin to learn at birth. A good illustration of how this happens is the way infants' brains respond to the language of caregivers. Katherine Long's report on what is known from the new methods of brain-science includes the judgment that "an explosion of growth occurs in the first three years of life. At birth, a baby's brain contains about 100 million neurons, the brain cells that carry electrical messages through the brain. Each one can produce up to 15,000 synapses, or connections to other brain cells. These synapses are the key to healthy development and learning." Biologically speaking, when the synapses are activated and exercised they tend to become permanent. Thus, when parents talk to their baby, they are helping to "wire" the infant's brain for language.

Patricia Kuhl, who has done research on when babies learn language, has concluded that "There isn't a single speech sound contrast used in the world's languages that infants can't distinguish at birth." Kuhl continues: "Infants have learned the sound of their native language by the age of six months." By eleven months babies start to lose the ability to differentiate between phonetic sounds that are not in their native language. So, long before infants are able to speak, they have learned the meaning of words and the lilt of their caregiver's language.¹

Just as infants have the ability to distinguish differences in speech sounds after birth, they have the ability to think. It is difficult for adults to realize that infants think because adults assume that thinking means analyzing situations rationally. Infants are not rational, for their brains are not fully developed, they do not have a fund of information, and they have little memory. But if we define thinking as "goal-directed cognitive activity," then infants learn how to think soon after birth.²

At three months of age infants have learned that objects fall when released. At four months they understand that objects exist even if put out of sight. At six months infants manipulate objects according to their purpose. At one year of age infants look for causes behind what happens and they are on their way to a problem-solving method of thinking which is well established by eighteen months of age. At two years of age, when young children can talk fairly well, their ability to observe and to think becomes more obvious. By three years of age children have worked out a naïve (primitive) understanding of physics, psychology, and biology.³

Some researchers believe that young children, especially after two years of age, do more active thinking than adults. This is because children are amazed at all the things going on about them, they are required to solve many practical problems, and they are open to a discussion of how things work.⁴ For example, Tristan, three years of age, asked, "Why doesn't my blood come out when I open my mouth?" Antonine, at the same age, watched his mother futilely trying to retrieve a helium-filled balloon that had lodged underneath a high-ceilinged stairwell. He said, "Mother, just make it go over to the side and you can walk upstairs and get it."⁵

BECOMING SELF-CONSCIOUS

Just as an infant's thinking grows from vague efforts to get what they want to simple problem solving in three years, so does self-consciousness. Infants grow from unconscious response to their caregivers to conscious accounts of themselves as persons. A consensus of research about infants' development of selfhood as outlined by Susan Harter is as follows:

- From birth to four months, one can see an emerging organization as babies adjust to a schedule of sleeping, feeding, elimination, and handling by caregivers.
- From four to ten months, there is increasing differentiation from caregivers. This comes about during the ritual of feeding, dressing, bathing, and play. Researchers have noted that during this period babies begin to learn that they can do things such as make a mobile move. As they respond to games like peek-a-boo, tickling, and "I'm going to get you," infants begin to learn that they are separate persons yet bonded to their caregivers.
- During the time from ten to fifteen months, there are many experiences infants share with caregivers. As a result, they begin to understand that they have minds of their own. Infants pay close attention to caregivers and communicate through body language and vocal noise. They know, for example, how to ask for a cookie or how to turn away from someone who is trying to get them to do something they don't want to do.
- After fifteen months, the growth of self understanding increases rapidly. By eighteen months young children recognize themselves in a mirror. They become more self assertive. They develop ideas of what they want to do independently of their caregivers. Some young children this age have worked out strategies to get their parents to give them what they want.
- The great leap forward is between the second and third birthdays. Because children during this time become more talkative, they ask questions and engage in conversations which enhance their self consciousness. With better command of language, young children begin their life story. They identify themselves to others, tell what has happened to them, or explain how they feel. They now know themselves as persons with attributes, interests, and thoughts that are their own.⁶

PRIMITIVE GOD REPRESENTATION

An image of God is created by young children by the end of their third year. This primitive image of God is formed to satisfy psychological needs of their self formation and it reflects their experience with caregivers. According to Ann-Marie Rizzuto, the process starts at birth because the parents' interpretation of the birth influences their response to the infant. The parents' desire for the baby, their understanding of their role in caring for the baby, their financial, social, and educational status, and other such factors are influential in their relationship to the child. Religious parents will probably have a baptism or dedication service symbolizing their understanding of God. The particular way the mother starts the self development of the infant is through eye contact and reflecting back to the child a sense of the child's status. In a healthy relationship, the infant absorbs a feeling of being loved and wanted.⁷

During the first seven or eight months, the infant has experiences related to caregivers of a physical nature such as being fed, bathed, held, looking at the mother's face, and hearing sounds or music. Experiences of this type continue throughout infancy and are preserved as eidetic memories. They may be later linked to a particular God image and may result in a good feeling when singing "Safe in the Arms of Jesus," "O Love that Will Not Let Me Go," "God Will Take Care of You," "Jesus, Lover of My Soul, Let Me to Thy Bosom Fly," or the refrain "And I shall see Him face to face." These early experiences form a feeling base on which a particular God image may be built. These experiences of infancy continue into childhood and are preserved, often unconsciously, in the self, regardless of the stage of cognitive development.

During or toward the last half of the third year, children develop an image of God which they can describe. This image will become more clearly focused as they grow. But even by age four children can indicate the characteristics of their God by drawing or dictating a letter to God.⁸ The God image children create between their second and third birthdays differs from other objects they internalize. The God image is not static. It is an inner feeling which influences their ideas of the world and their behavior. This does not mean that the God image is something they like. Some infants dislike or are indifferent to their God image. A child as young as five may—because of the death of the father—blame God and decide not to respect that God.⁹ Like conscience, with which the God image may become fused in a year or two, the God image is an inner reality the child cannot ignore. It is the only reality within the self that knows all about the self and is related to all the problems and feelings of the self.

LESSONS FROM RESEARCH

If we add to this brief summary of research about young children studies of older children's religion, we will notice three major factors that influence their beliefs about God. First, there is culture. Children are born in a particular culture which is interpreted to the child by parents, adults with whom the child associates, and peers. From these sources a child learns the kind of behavior, beliefs, and values that are approved.¹⁰ If parents belong to an ethnic, racial, or religious group that has values different from the general cultural values, children will quickly learn those differences.

Second, there is the religion of the parents. For our purpose this includes the life and work of the congregation to which they belong. Parents, through participation in congregational worship and work, are constantly being nurtured, instructed, and supported in their faith. So, the quality of the parents' participation in congregational life becomes the Christian life which is modeled for the child.

Third, there is the relation of parents to children. Children often use their relation to parents as the basis of their primitive understanding of what God is like. Also, children learn about God and morals by the way religion is practiced in the home, the way parents answer questions about God, and the advice parents give about situations in which children must speak or act.

BIBLICAL WISDOM

The Bible is primarily about God and what God expects of us, not about nurturing children. There are, however, sections of Scripture that record people's experience in communicating their faith to their children. The most comprehensive and concise passage is the Shema.

The Shema starts with the responsibility of adults to love God with their whole being (vv. 4-5). Hebrews who related to God in this way would be a community with beliefs and values which distinguished them from the nation in which they lived. Adults and children learned from living in the Hebrew community.

Parents are to communicate faith in and knowledge about God to their children through direct teaching (vv. 6-7a), through conversations about events that happen in the home (v. 7b), and through public display of their faith by belief statements on their arms and forehead, and signs on their houses (vv. 8-9).

RE-FORMING CHILDREN'S NURTURE

Children, according to research and the Shema, acquire religion as they do language. This acquisition is rooted in the first few years of life. As children grow, their language, as well as their belief, about God is shaped and corrected by the religious community to which they belong and by direct instruction from their parents. Additional support about belief in God may be provided by a religious school.

The above summary of how faith in God is acquired and developed requires a strategy that: (1) identifies the educational role of culture, (2) honors the congregation as the place where adults learn to be disciples of Christ, (3) helps parents coach their children as described in the Shema, and (4) provides schooling in Christian stories and beliefs.

Mainstream Protestant congregations are involved in each of the four elements that form children's faith in God. But the issue is in the priority given to each element. Many Protestant congregations give priority to schooling without realizing that it may be the least effective of the four. They do so because church leaders in their childhood had a good Sunday school experience and because it is commonly assumed that learning takes place in a school. This schooling strategy was a great success when it was developed in the 1800s. Under the spell of evangelical Protestantism, churches, family life, public schools, and almost all colleges and civic organizations transmitted Christian beliefs and morals. The special purpose of the Sunday school in that era was to evangelize children and to teach denominational doctrines.¹¹

Given the secular nature of the early part of the 2000s, what would be an effective strategy for the Christian education of children? The answer is to give high priority to culture, congregation, and family as sources of learning about God—without decreasing the role of schooling. The following comments suggest ways this can be done.

Culture. We learn cultural values by responding to the society in which we live. I believe that in spite of the wide-spread deference given to religion in the United States, our society is now more secular than religious. All of our tax-supported educational

institutions are now officially secular. A recent study shows that teenagers confirmed in the Presbyterian Church tend to drift away from the church because the beliefs are not important to them.¹² The Gallup organization, after polling the religious beliefs and practices of Americans for more than fifty years, concluded: “While religion is highly popular in America, it is to a large extent superficial: it does not change people’s lives to the degree one would expect from their level of professed faith.”¹³ This may be, as Alasdair MacIntyre explains, due to churches in America adapting themselves to the members’ social and personal needs.¹⁴ It could be that secular values such as desire for pleasure, the importance of success measured in terms of possessions or social status, or the rights of individuals for self enhancement have become accepted assumptions of church people.

An example of how secular values may influence congregational life was tested by Marsha Witten. She studied the sermons of Presbyterian and Southern Baptist ministers. Although there were differences between these two denominations, a rather large percentage of the sermons focused attention on individual psychological concerns, benefits of religion for a good life, and a simplification of doctrines into precise steps so people would have a “time- and labor-saving” path to salvation.¹⁵ Divorce, lack of concern for Sunday as a day for rest and worship, and church success measured in terms of size of budget, building, or attendance are about as evident in evangelical as mainstream churches.¹⁶ John Seel, an evangelical historian, believes that “today evangelicalism faces a quandary. Historically it is the nation’s first faith. It has been culturally dominant for most of the nation’s history. The number of evangelical churches and evangelicals continue to increase, but our influence within American society is declining.”¹⁷ He cites the reason for this assessment as evangelicalism’s “accommodation to modernity.”¹⁸

It is easy to become accommodated to modernity because we live in such a culture. Its values are thrust upon us by the mass media, many social institutions, and by the work place. We seldom realize how many of our values are formed by culture. Thus, leaders of congregations often bring their culturally induced values into the church without realizing their source. The issue, however, is not a sharp distinction between church and culture because American culture includes many Judao-Christian virtues. The issue is how congregational leaders can become more aware of Christian beliefs and how such beliefs result in a lifestyle in church and society. So, the first priority of this strategy is raising the consciousness of church members about Christian beliefs and practices in contrast to secular values.

Adults in community. According to the above church-in-culture situation, most adult Christians live with some tension between beliefs and lifestyle. There are few ways of reducing this tension, but the congregation is the community where this matter can be discussed and where adults can make decisions about their role in church and society. Such faith-in-relation-to-culture contemplation will do two things. First, it will stimulate adults to a reformulation of their childish ideas of God. Second, it will strengthen their influence in areas where they have control. The congregation will become less a

gathering of people and more a community dedicated to being the body of Christ; that is, a continuation of Christ’s ministry. The adults who are parents will more easily communicate their faith to their children as described in the Shema. Also, adults with the support of a congregation may be able to influence their associates in their work place.

Identifying adults as the starting place for Christian formation is seldom done. Excellent formation may happen in worship through the music, prayers, Scripture readings, and sermon. Also, projects that relate adults to the needs of their community help to deepen and broaden one’s faith. But two elements, often overlooked, are needed for an effective nurture of adults. One is a systematic study of the Bible and theology. The other is some way adults can relate their experiences to Christian beliefs. This happens in study classes if the classes are small enough, or it may be done by providing counseling or support groups for special needs, but it will not happen unless congregational leaders understand that *adults are the ones who create the spiritual ethos of a congregation.*

Family faith. Our common experience, supported by many studies, reminds us that children will almost always absorb and practice whatever religion their caregivers have. But helping parents understand their role in forming their children’s image of God is difficult. This is in part because parents assume children are not ready for religious formation until they begin to ask questions about God or until they are about four years old. It is also difficult for parents to assume a more prominent role in the religious formation of their children when both parents work outside the home. These family matters must, however, be managed in the knowledge that characteristics underlying belief in God and primitive ideas of God are formed in early childhood.

Given the conditions noted above, and cultural factors such as commercial TV programs with ads designed to train children to be consumers, churches can still help parents nurture their children’s faith in God. *This will not happen, however, unless church leaders realize that family life is the most influential factor in the formation, interpretation, and support of children’s faith in God.* Large churches can employ a minister to counsel parents and design classes for their special needs. Any size church can provide classes for parents and obtain materials for religious instruction in the home.

A few years ago the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) appointed a committee to prepare a new catechism. Austin Seminary Professor of Christian Education Laura Lewis, a member of that committee and an editor of several of its publications, encouraged the publisher to prepare a children’s edition for use in the home as well as the Sunday school. The results are a children’s version, *Belonging to God: A First Catechism*, and a handbook for its use in the home, *We Are the Family of God: Conversations about the Catechism.*¹⁹ If churches helped parents use the handbook at home, children would form an excellent foundation for faith in God.

Schooling. Ideally, children should have a general education which includes religious instruction that supports and expands the Christian nurture they receive in congregation and home. Few children have such an education since almost all attend tax-sup-

ported secular public schools. As a practical matter, the only schooling in Bible and beliefs available today is in the Sunday school, or short-term events such as vacation Bible school, summer camps, or conferences. We must continue to improve these agencies of instruction as a part of an overall strategy; but we must understand they are not designed to be the most important source of children's Christian education. ❧

NOTES

¹ The quotations from Katherine Long and Patricia Kuhl are from a news article in the *Austin American-Statesman*. July 4, 1997: E4.

² Judy S. Deloache, Kevin F. Miller, and Sophia L. Pierroutsakos, "Reasoning and Problem Solving," in *Handbook of Child Psychology*. 2:803. All of volume 2 is about "cognition, perception, and language." The chapters on "Infant Cognition," "Representation," "Language Acquisition," "Knowledge Acquisition in Foundation Domains," and "Social Cognition" are of special value for understanding how children's minds develop.

³ Henry M. Wellman and Susan A. Gelman, "Knowledge Acquisition in Foundational Domains," in *Handbook of Child Psychology* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998) 2:554-563. See also chapter 14, "Cognition as a Collaborative Process."

⁴ Deloache, 802.

⁵ Deloache, 801-802.

⁶ Susan Harter, "The Development of Self-Representations," in *Handbook of Child Psychology* 3:553-600. See also Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

⁷ Anne-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 182-188.

⁸ David Heller, *The Children's God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986) See also Martin A. Lang, *Acquiring Our Image of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

⁹ Russell Baker, *Growing Up* (New York: Congdon and Weed, 1982), 61.

¹⁰ David Maybury-Lewis, *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World* (New York: Viking Press, 1992).

¹¹ For a more detailed account of the way Protestants formulated an educational strategy, see my *How Faith Matures* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 186-194.

¹² Benton Johnson, Dean Hoge, and Donald Luidens "Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline," in *First Things*, March 1993, 13-18. Dean Hoge and associates, using the same research methods used in the Presbyterian study, surveyed confirmed Roman Catholic young adults. In contrast to Presbyterians, fewer Catholic young adults dropped out of the church and about half of those who did drop out returned later. Hoge noted, "Young adult Catholics differ from mainline Protestants in that they (especially Latinos) have a stronger ethnic identity, a stronger identification with their church, and a more basic feeling that Catholicism is the 'real thing.' ... Catholics seem to have a 'glue' that Protestants do not have." *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 219.

¹³ George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1989), 16, 21.

¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Secularization and Moral Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 32.

¹⁵ Marsha G. Witten, *All is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1993), 129-140.

¹⁶ Martin Marty, "Will Success Spoil Evangelicalism?" in *The Christian Century*, July 19-26, 2000 757-761.

¹⁷ John Seel, *The Evangelical Forfeit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 18.

¹⁸ Seel, 23.

¹⁹ Ann Reed Held and Sally Stockley Johnson, *We are the Family of God: Family Conversations About the Catechism* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998).

SUGGESTED READING

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Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990)

David Heller, *The Children's God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986)

C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1967)

C. Ellis Nelson, *How Faith Matures* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989)

C. Ellis Nelson, *Helping Teenagers Grow Morally: A Guide for Adults* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992)

C. Ellis Nelson, "Formation of a God Representation," in *Religious Education*, vol. 91, No. 1, Winter 1996

Ana-Maria Rizzuto, "The Psychological Foundations of Belief in God," in *Toward Moral and Religious Maturity* (Morristown, NJ: Silver Burdett Co., 1980)

C. ELLIS NELSON:
CHILDREN AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

You begin your article by saying that the wisdom of the Shema is ignored by most churches. Could you say more about that?

Well, the Shema is written from the standpoint of religion in a community, and the responsibility for teaching religious faith in this community is primarily on the parents. The Shema stands in contrast to contemporary life in our modern culture and in most churches, where we tend to think that if you want to learn anything, you have to go to school. If you want to learn to dance, you go to a dancing school. If you want to weld, you go to welding school. If you want to learn theology, you go to a seminary. The question has to do with what we are learning. The Shema works on the theory that learning religious faith is more like learning language. It starts early. It's very deep. And it involves something like unargued assumptions.

There are a lot of unargued assumptions you learn as a child. For instance, you should dress differently when you come to church or attend birthday parties. Things are done a certain way and they're just done that way, that's all there is to it. So, we learn a lot of things from our culture, and these things are communicated largely through the family, and primarily in the early years by parents and by relationships within the family.

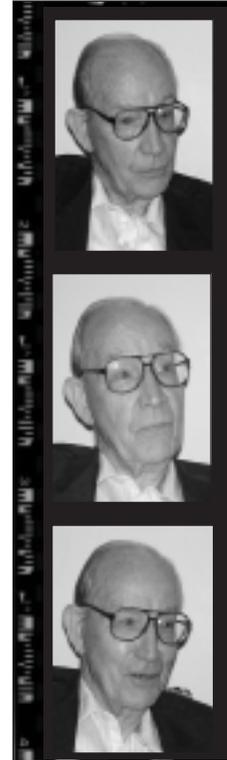
The Shema is written on that basis, on the basis that the early understanding of God is very important, very deep, and has to do with the total person, not just the mind. Therefore, the teaching takes place in a very specific way. It's not a casual thing. The Shema says that when the child asks questions, you answer them. And it's in the everyday conversation between children and parents that learning happens.

What do you mean when you use the word "culture"?

The word culture is a soft word. We don't quite know what it means or what it implies. But in the family, it's very precise; it's "Do this, don't do that," or, "This is what we do and here's the reason we do it." And that kind of instruction goes on incessantly in families. That's what the Shema is getting at, and that's also what we learn from modern understandings of children in the home in relation to the images of God children develop.¹

Such as the images of God that children reflect in the pictures they draw of God or of Jesus?

We see in these pictures all kinds of things that children learned in the home, and they've projected these understandings onto God because they've also learned from the home and culture that there is something called, God and if you ask, "Where did I come from?" parents often say, "Well, God sent you."



ADULTS WHO ARE PARENTS NEED TO HAVE THEIR THEOLOGY STRAIGHT BECAUSE THEY'RE INCESSANTLY INTERPRETING IT TO THEIR CHILDREN. IT MAY BE THAT THE FIRST PROFESSIONAL PERSON EMPLOYED BY A CONGREGATION IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION SHOULD BE A PERSON WHO HELPS THE PARENTS WITH THEIR TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS FAITH IN THE HOME.

I appreciate your phrase "unargued assumptions." It seems you are describing a process of intentional steeping—a slow absorption over a long period of time—of those values and beliefs in a culture that, in the end, are almost too deep to discuss. Is that accurate?

Well, there is some part of this that is simply unconscious, too deep to ferret out. But I also don't want to get away from the fact that in the family there's ceaseless coaching. "Don't do that." "Why?" "Because it's not nice." Or: "Do this." "Why?" "Because it is nice." Hundreds of times a day, an adult will be coaching a child. The same thing happens with learning a language. "You say it this way." "Pronounce the word properly." Ceaseless coaching. You do the same thing with religious faith. And it occurs at about the same time period. By two years of age, children can talk fairly well. They certainly can make their wants known. And the research shows that by age three, children have a conception of God that is their own.

If the current research is correct, and an image of God is formed by children by the end of their third year, how can churches support a positive development of an image of God?

The answer is that we have the wrong strategy—it's back to schools. We think that children should learn about God when they are four, five, or six years of age and begin to ask questions like, "What happened to my dog when he died?" or something of that nature, which is very important, but it's further along the line. We think children should start school around six. We get them into Sunday school at that age, and sometimes later on in childhood, when in fact a lot of the learning about God has already happened in a subterranean way, deep within their psyche. And much of what they will know about God is already there. This is a strategy issue. We currently view schooling

as the key to our strategy. The Shema deals with the home and early training as the key to the strategy.

What does that mean for congregations?

What that means is that in congregations, from a practical standpoint, we ought to start Christian education with adults. That's opposite from what we usually do. Our churches will often build a Sunday school building first for children because of the dominance of a schooling model. The strategy ought to be to build something for adults. Why? Because adults set the ethos of the congregation. The adults who are parents need to have their theology straight because they're incessantly interpreting it to the children, almost from the day of birth.

The actual instruction in Sunday school is important but it ought to be a support for what is going on in the home. The congregation is the place where the Christian faith is interpreted. Part of the congregation's life of instruction ought to be its training of the parents. It may be that the first professional person employed by a congregation in Christian education should be a person who helps the parents with their teaching of religious faith in the home, because parents are the child's first teachers of religion.

Realizing that children develop their understanding of God very early in life, what can the church do to help children and their parents deepen, enrich, and fill out this basic understanding?

There was a child in a recent study whose understanding of God was like this: God was sitting in a kind of room, and he had the devil over a trap door and was going to trap the devil. So the child was very conscious of evil. And God was trying to control the devil.

It seems to me that teachers in church school classes should get some kind of a conception of what the images of God are in those children that they're working with because you have a correctional aspect that can be worked right there. Now in the case of this child concerned about the struggle between good and evil, I talked with the minister, and he had come to the conclusion that the child is in a poorly functioning family. Friday she leaves home and stays with her grandparents all through the weekend. The grandparents are the ones who take her to church, the grandparents buy her clothes, the grandparents are really what she lives for. Her home is a struggle. She's not accepted. So the teacher's and the pastor's awareness of her childhood image of God leads to pastoral care.

Teachers need to have what might be called a pastoral care approach to their work with children. They can't abandon the stories of the faith. They've got to tell the stories and what they mean. But they also need more reaction from the children as to what the stories of the faith mean to them in the process.

You once said that the church's worship is its primary curriculum. What is our role as adults in utilizing this curriculum for the spiritual development of our children?

We're not getting enough mileage out of the formal curriculum of worship, especially

the sermon. Now that doesn't mean that the sermon is more important than other elements of worship. The music may actually be more important—I don't want to get into that discussion. I just mean that the sermon is a deliberate act on the part of a trained person to say something significant to the people, and there's time allotted for it. I think we don't get very much mileage out of it. Often the sermon is off on things the minister is interested in, rather than something of concern to the congregation.

Could you give us an illustration of what you mean?

In a church I once attended, the minister worked out a plan. I think he was unconscious of all he was doing, but he said to the teenagers: "On the third Sunday of the month, I will preach on whatever subject you submit as of concern to you." And right away, you should have seen what happened! The teenagers, in their meetings during the week, began to ask each other, "What is it that's significant enough to ask the minister?"

They didn't tell him what to preach. He just invited them to tell him what was worrying them. The Sunday I heard about this he preached on how to know the will of God, and I said to myself, "Well, I haven't heard a sermon on that in fifty years." But that's what the teenagers had asked the pastor to address. They asked because it was the time most of them were thinking about going to college—these are young people in high school—and they were saying, "Well, if God's got anything to do with my life, it has to do with my vocation. How do I know?" So they gave him that question. Now, he preached on it in such a way that it was of general value to the congregation, but that isn't all. The young people were all sitting on the front row, taking notes, because he had agreed to meet them that night and discuss his answers.

The parents, incidentally, showed up too. They wanted to know what the teenagers were worried about. So now you've got an involvement of the whole congregation. You've got preaching now that's coordinated in the life of the congregation. And this preaching, I think, has much more traction than just another topic that the minister thinks is important.

How can worship involve younger children?

Now with children, it seems to me, we're into a very thorny issue here about activities for them in worship—and I can get into trouble fairly quickly. But I'm sorry someone invented the children's sermon. It's usually, I would say at least seventy-five percent of the time, designed to amuse the adults, and it doesn't really involve the children. The question is really, "How can we involve children in the total work of the congregation?" And I think that's the basic issue rather than, "How can we do better children's sermons?"

I want to focus on the things children can do so they can participate more authentically in the church's worship. Not made-up stuff. Part of their participation could be singing, and part of it could be reading Scripture—maybe even a sort of choral reading of Scripture, where they've memorized it or they read it in different parts. The reading of Scripture is already an authentic part of worship. If the children got up there, even small children, and read Scripture, they have participated in something that's authentic for worship.

I think the crucial question is, “What can children do to participate in a meaningful way in the church’s worship?” And there are a lot of things they can do.

How can we balance our commitment to support families as they train children in the faith with our commitment to improve the training we provide in church school?

Congregational leaders need to become more deliberate about helping adults to live a Christian life. Sunday worship is the major element in moving toward this goal, and other things such as service projects and classes also help. But too often adult education is an afterthought in the church’s program rather than its first priority.

In order for a church to really move in this direction, it requires a vision on the part of the pastor and church officers. They’d set the goal. And through a process I call “disjointed incrementalism,” they would move toward the goal. It’s the way we have to work in the church. Slowly, when there is a chance to improve and expand the adult education program, or to provide more help for parents, the officers move toward the goal.

It would be a disaster to announce such a goal and say that next year we’re going to reach that goal. We have to work toward the goal slowly. So, the best I can say is that it’s a matter of vision and priority, and developing a group of leaders in the church who agree on the goal, and every time there is a chance to move toward the goal, a move is made.

Let’s say you’ve been invited by a church that has this kind of vision to speak to their parents. What are two things that you would tell them to start doing at home right now to help their children grow spiritually?

Well, the first thing I would tell them is to pray before meals. Now, I know not many families gather for meals anymore, but there may be one every now and then when you could get together, and that’s very important, especially for very small children. Very small children learn the attitude, the mood, and demeanor of prayer even though they don’t get much more out of it.

One day, at a meal for Austin Seminary faculty and their families, I saw something that says volumes about how important prayer is for small children. The children were playing in the backyard when it came time to eat. I was sitting at the table with the mother of one of these children. She saved a place for her daughter, who didn’t want to come in because she was having fun. The adults went ahead with their meal, and after a while the child came in, and sat down. She got some food on her plate. She started eating and then she stopped. She stopped right away, she bowed her head and reached for her mother’s hand. She was quite young, but the point is that the posture, the attitude of prayer, gets instilled early. Obviously this child was in the habit of praying with her mother, who is a professor at the Seminary, and her father, when they eat their meals.

Another important time of day for children is at the end of their day. This can become an important time for training in the faith. Children, especially young children, want somebody to put them to bed and cover them up, and pat them, and that’s really a wonderful time to go over things that happened during the day and have a short

prayer or a story. You know, three- and four-year-olds want to be read to. You read them stories and it’s more than content they’re getting, it’s a demeanor. “This is the kind of people we are. Here’s our lifestyle.”

Another idea would be to plan one night a week when the whole family commits to being together for dinner and conversation. Now that’s not strictly speaking “religious,” but it can convey important beliefs and values, and can be religious in the sense of the choices that are being made and the sharing that is modeled. Those moments when children have their parents to themselves, those are very powerful moments. But I don’t think this is happening in a lot of church families, because it is generally assumed that the child is learning religion in church school, so we don’t think we have to do anything. 50

NOTE

¹ Nelson is referring here to the research in children’s images of God done by Robert Coles and David Heller. See “Suggested Reading,” p. 11.

Diana Garland is chair of the School of Social Work and director of the Center for Family and Community Ministries at Baylor University. She is editor of Family Ministry: Empowering Through Faith and author of fourteen books; the most recent is Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide (InterVarsity Press, 1999). She received her M.S.S.W. and Ph.D. from the University of Louisville in Kentucky.

DIANA R. GARLAND

The Gospel of Luke relates four events that are significant in Jesus' care and preparation for ministry, and that are relevant to our care for at-risk children. First, when Mary learned from the angel of the conception that had taken place within her, she went "with haste" to her cousins Zechariah and Elizabeth, where she found welcome and blessing. The writer does not tell us whether she talked with her mother or even with Joseph at this point, telling us instead about how she found the support she needed outside her closest family.

The second event comes in the account of Jesus' birth. The young couple had traveled to Joseph's home territory. I imagine that Joseph's women kinfolk would have gathered to help, to support, and to celebrate this birth. Yet the writer does not tell us whether they were there or not. What deserves a story is that God provided a community of rough men—shepherds—who show up in the night to see the new baby and talk about how wonderful he is. What the Gospel writer finds significant enough to tell us is that God's son deserved welcome into a community. And in a lonely world being shuffled by a government registration, God provided that community.

The next two events take place in the temple. First, Jesus' parents took him to the temple in Jerusalem for the rites of purification when he was forty days old. Perhaps people were whispering about this child and about them. If folks had not heard the unusual circumstances of his conception, then they had probably at least heard shepherds' tales about angelic visitations. As Mary and Joseph walked into the temple, two prophets, Anna and Simeon, greeted them, each in turn taking the child out of the arms of his parents and praising God. Each of them blessed Mary and Joseph, telling how wonderful their child was, how important he would be, but how hard it would be for them to love and care for him. It is a story of a community blessing and strengthening and helping them. God breaks in and fills these two old prophets with the Holy Spirit, who then turn and bless the child and the parents.

The final story underscores the building significance of the community in the life of this family. They have walked up to Jerusalem for the holidays with a bunch of friends and relatives. Jesus is twelve years old. On the way home, already a full day's journey down the road, they realize they have left him behind. They lived in a world in which the community of friends, neighbors, and relatives share in the care of children.

They had just assumed Jesus was traveling with someone else in the clan. Today, we would charge them with child neglect. Jesus' community, however, makes no such accusation. He is not in a children's shelter alone and frightened and wondering when they will come for him. He is instead surrounded by a community of faith, where he is both learning and teaching.

These are not stories primarily of skillful parenting. Mary and Joseph certainly were committed and willing to follow where parenting this child led them, but they did so with the support and involvement of the community. Jesus learned and began to teach himself in the nurturing community he found in the temple. We can imagine that Mary told him the stories of his birth. They were stories of his parents' faithfulness, but they were also stories of a family rooted in and nurtured by a much wider community of faith.

Study after study shows us that good parents have strong support systems. They have other adults who help with parenting and the stresses of living. We know that most people who abuse their kids are not mentally ill. But they do feel isolated and overwhelmed. Many are living in poverty. Raising children is stressful and demanding. We lose sight of the joy, the blessing, and the promise of parenting when we carry the burdens all by ourselves. Yet in today's world, parents are more and more carrying the responsibilities all alone. Families are seldom nestled in a neighborhood of people who know one another and look out for one another. Our friendships are not family supports. Adult friendships are more likely to be based in work settings than in neighborhoods, which means our friends are individual friends more than they are family friends. Moms and dads make friends over the Mr. Coffee at work, not over the backyard fence while the kids play. Parents today often do not know the parents of their children's friends, much less feel comfortable sharing their children back and forth.

As Christians, we must recognize that your children are my children. They belong to all of us. If we are not Anna and Simeon to the children in our midst, who will bless them and remind them of the promise God has placed in them? Jesus grew and became strong and filled with wisdom in the midst of a whole company of family and friends. He studied and talked and tried out ideas with the adults in the temple. Jesus is still with us, in each child born. Jesus said that as we care for each little one, we care for Jesus: "As you have done it for one of these little ones, you have done it for me." We are the people in the company of travelers, the fellow learners in the temple, for Jesus.

Several research studies of children who grow up in traumatic circumstances have come to some interesting conclusions. The researchers studied children they have called "resilient." These children have grown up to lead satisfying, healthy lives with careers and strong families of their own, even though they had been physically or sexually abused, or their parents had chronic mental illness. Researchers compared these resilient grown-up children to "victims"—grown-up children who were scarred and socially handicapped by their childhood experiences. They found that the survivors who grew up seemingly unscathed by their families' troubles had one thing that the victims did not have. They had an adult friend, a neighbor, an aunt or uncle or grandparent, a teacher or a coach, some adult somewhere who loved them with big doses,

who thought they were very, very special. These adults were not therapists or skilled professionals. They were persons who knew how to bless a child with love and joy. And they were prophets. They prophesied that those children had a great promise put in them by God. They blessed and supported their parents, upholding and encouraging them. Just like Simeon and Anna did for Jesus.

What can the church do?

First, we can only build strong families in our churches if we build our churches as strong communities. We need evangelistic ministries that seek out parents, offering friendship and support, communicating very clearly: “You are not alone. We are here to help you. In the family of God, we are willing to be Anna and Simeon and Grandma and Uncle to your children.” Every child and parent in our church programs needs to be adopted by caring adults who are committed to be their church family. Every child needs several adults who know that child’s name and gifts and interests. No child should ever come to church and have the only adult with whom they have contact be their Sunday school teacher. Children need to be folded into the life of the church with adults, not just in age-graded programs. They need to be included in worship, in fellowship, in ministry, even in the business of the church, just like they are included in the heart of the work and play of the family.

Second, we need to reach out to families in our communities, offering vulnerable parents the Good News of Jesus Christ, that every child—even one grown-up and despairing—is precious in his sight. One church pairs its own families with homeless families in the community. They visit them in the homeless shelter. Once permanent shelter is located, they visit them in their new home. Sometimes a child in one family can help a child in the other family with school work. Parents sit and drink coffee together and talk about life. On occasion, the church family helps their new friends find furnishings for their home. They provide a link to the community and encourage a mom on welfare as she begins vocational school.

Third, we need a call to justice from the pulpits of our churches, in the ways we vote, and in our willingness to invest sacrificially in our children. In the end, the question must be not what is the cheapest help we can get by with, but how can we place children first in our priorities? They should be the first priority when we consider issues like gun control, welfare, and health care. They should be the first concern we address in budgeting our scarce governmental and church budget dollars. In the end, we as individuals will find that the ways in which we care for children will be judged as our response to the Christ in our midst. ❧

David Thompson serves as vice president for Administration and General Counsel for Presbyterian Children’s Homes and Services at its administrative offices in Austin, Texas. He received B.B.A. and J.D. degrees from Baylor University and has represented children in juvenile court and in child abuse and neglect proceedings.

DAVID THOMPSON

Every time I see a rambunctious child during worship, I think of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples: “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Mark 10:14). I picture the disciples in this story as ushers telling guests to please turn off their cell phones and pagers and take crying babies to the nursery. But what if the children weren’t just whispering or playing too loudly or being a little disruptive? What if they had spray-painted a building, smashed a car window, or stolen from a convenience store? Or what if they had committed some horrific act of violence upon another person—even murder? And what if the children weren’t so little, but were somewhere between the innocence of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood?

It’s hard to love these children. Would Jesus still extend an invitation to them to be in his presence? Would he, for his own safety and the safety of those around him, want to separate these children from the community? Or would Jesus bless them and include them in the kingdom of God? How then should we respond to these children? After all, the church over the years has prayed to God at baptisms to bring children “safely through the perils of childhood” and deliver them from “the temptations of youth.”¹

In the context of the criminal justice system, “justice” can be viewed from at least two perspectives. First, there is the community’s interest in protecting its members and providing appropriate consequences for inappropriate behavior. This includes supporting an environment in which victims of crime may heal. Second, justice involves ensuring that those who are accused of or have committed crimes are treated fairly, equitably, and, from the church’s standpoint, with grace. The tension between these two perspectives drives the policies that make up our system of justice. When dealing with children and youth, the conflict becomes even more pointed. Virtually everyone would agree that children below a given age should be treated differently by the justice system. They are less criminally responsible for their own actions and are perhaps more capable of rehabilitation. Children are not just little adults.

Juvenile justice systems were separated from adult criminal courts in the United States in the early twentieth century.² This was about the same time that child labor and mandatory education laws were passed. The belief was that treating children like adult

criminals was destructive to the child. The goal was to focus on the child in need as opposed to the act the child had committed. Even the vocabulary of the adult criminal system was changed. Instead of being found guilty, juveniles were judged “delinquent.”

What does this mean for us in light of school shootings and other high-profile instances of violence committed by youth? Virtually all states have enacted “get tough” laws that increase punishments in juvenile courts and make it easier for children to be brought into the adult system. Punishments are harsher in adult courts and there is even less focus on rehabilitation. A majority of states automatically requires that certain types of offenses be transferred to the adult system without any regard for the needs of the youth involved. Twenty-three states allow capital punishment as a sentencing option for juveniles even though this practice is condemned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the American Bar Association among many others.

The community’s perspective toward punishment and protecting its members has weighed heavily in these changes and pulled the juvenile justice system away from its historic beliefs and goals. Has this shift been justified? Despite a public perception that youth today are more violent than in the past, the violent crime arrest rates for adults ages eighteen to twenty-four and adults ages twenty-five to thirty-four have been higher than for youth ages ten to seventeen since at least 1970. The year-to-year changes in arrest rates for these age groups have paralleled one another. The number of victim reports of violent crime committed by youth has been decreasing since 1993 and has remained below the 1981 level since 1995.

Yet, the effect of the legislative changes is that more and more children are involved with the juvenile justice system. Juveniles in the United States are incarcerated at a higher rate than adults in most other countries. The number of juveniles admitted to adult prisons more than doubled between 1985 and 1997, and most juveniles in custody are housed in facilities that are operating beyond their capacity.

Studies have found serious deficiencies in health care available to incarcerated juveniles, and there is very little appropriate treatment for substance abuse and mental health disorders. Many children who become involved with the justice system are already borderline students. Time away from school and inadequate educational facilities at some detention centers may lead to additional educational problems and dropout. Juvenile detention facilities house children for a variety of reasons, and a child who ran away from home because of abuse or neglect might bunk below a child who committed a violent offense.

Even with the recent “get tough” trend towards transfer of juveniles to the adult system, prison officials estimate that almost eighty percent of juveniles will be released by the time they turn twenty-one and well over ninety percent will be released by their twenty-eighth birthday. The influences these juveniles face while in prison and the lack of services provided to them make a positive return to the community less likely for them as young adults. This increases the possibility that the person will be an even greater danger to the community. If the ultimate goal is to protect the community, either juvenile sentences must continue to be significantly increased or services avail-

able to juveniles must be improved.

Several things become apparent when you visit a juvenile court. These really are children. Their reactions to the circumstances they face and the ways adults interact with them make that clear. The parents of these children often do not possess appropriate parenting skills and usually appear to be at their wit’s end. Many parents need and want help with their kids while others have just walked away. I once sat between a fifteen-year-old client and her mother during a hearing as the mother told the judge she didn’t care if she ever saw her own child again. But my client, a young mother herself, continued to work hard at being a good mom for her little boy even under very difficult circumstances. The judges tend to be about three-fourths officer-of-the-court and one-fourth social worker. They look for cues from the child regarding whether or not this is someone who is likely to turn in a more positive direction and what it might take to get him or her there. They will enforce the law, however, and it is up to the system to punish, rehabilitate, and otherwise prepare these children for re-entry into the community.

The best approach for addressing problems associated with the juvenile justice system is to identify factors that put a child at greater risk for delinquency and minister to children in ways that reduce that risk. Research has shown that to be successful these programs must provide comprehensive services that include the child’s family and seek to address community, school, and peer relationships.³

The opening phrase of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s *A Vision for Children and the Church* declares that, “all children are a gift of God, created by God and created good; all children are a gift to the whole of human community.”⁴ The community has failed when a child is seen as something other than a gift of God. The community has failed when a child is judged to be something other than good. There are times when the protection of the community and punishment for wrong behavior must be the paramount concerns. To have reached this point is as much a failure of the community as it is a failure of the children and their parents. Children are indeed a gift of God. It is our Christian opportunity and obligation to nurture all children committed to our care, even those who are hard to love. ❧

NOTES

¹ The Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, *The Book of Common Worship*, “Order for the Administration of the Sacrament of Baptism to Infants” (Philadelphia: Publication Division, 1946), 124.

² All historical information, information regarding recent trends, and statistical data in this article is from the following report: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Juvenile Crime, Juvenile Justice*. Panel on Juvenile Crime: Prevention, Treatment, and Control. Joan McCord, Cathy Spatz Widom, and Nancy A. Crowell, eds. Committee on Law and Justice and Board on Children, Youth, and Families (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2001). This report is available online at <http://www.nap.edu>.

³ *Ibid*, 4:22.

⁴ *A Vision for Children and the Church*, adopted by the 205th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), June 1993.

Pamela Couture is associate professor of pastoral theology at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School and the author of Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty (Abingdon, 2000). She earned the B.A. from Ashland College, the M.Div. from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and the Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

PAMELA COUTURE

Wilson is a twelve-year-old child in rural South Africa. Both of his parents have died of AIDS, so he lives alone. He keeps house in his parents' shack, making all things neat. He dreams of shoes. When the aid worker breaks the rules and buys him a pair of shoes, he is so grateful. "Now, when I go to school, I will be like the other children!"

Robert, an African American, lives with his mother and brothers. His mother cares deeply about his future, so she has enrolled her sons in a mentorship program. She hopes that with the help of a white male advocate, she might be able to get the attention for her children that they need.

Andrea's family fled their original country during civil war and received asylum in another developing country. Now, there is little work in that country, so her parents are seeking education and employment in the United States. Even with a lawyer provided by a local congregation, the wait for a green card is much longer than the three months originally promised.

These children and their families represent "the widows, orphans, and resident aliens" of contemporary society. Within the United States, poor children often live in communities with declining institutions—the manufacturing plant has closed or the family farm has been sold, civic organizations have left, families who are able have moved elsewhere, and the ones who remain have few helpful networks to connect them to jobs, education, healthcare, protection, and sources of food, including grocery stores. And within thriving communities, where the social ecology of the community is strong, vulnerable children often live invisible and isolated, close at hand, but beyond connections to local congregations.

Globally, the most vulnerable children and their families live on less than two dollars a day. They are vulnerable to preventable childhood diseases, HIV infection, sexual trafficking, and military conscription. They lack access to clean water, healthy food, medical care, and basic education. Sometimes, they have lost access to their families and countries of origin.

The stark realities of the situations faced by the poor and destitute children of the world bring Christians face to face with basic Christian ideas. God has made all of God's children in God's image; God's divinity is reflected in the faces of all children.

God has placed children in an abundant world that can supply the wants of all God's people, if people use creation wisely. In the freedom of the world, however, sin and evil have taken hold. Sin creates distortions in the behavior of individuals. Evil emerges when sin is organized into systems that take on a life of their own. Evil creates effects that are borne by some persons more than others. It tempts others into believing that the systems that support their lives may be organized so that some people are expendable. Evil crushes the poor and destitute and seduces the rich into believing either that they are rightfully the heirs of excess or that they are powerless against such evil. In Christianity, human relationships, especially relationships with vulnerable people, are considered a means of God's grace. If evil as a system enables poverty, but the people of poverty and wealth are a means of grace for each other, does the grace of God empower us, poor and rich together, to fight against evil?

Destitute people, in the U.S. and globally, have much self-determination, but they are socially isolated. Rich people may be comfortable, but they may be equally isolated. The future for all of our children will be determined by the relationships we are able to establish across income levels. Toward that end I recommend the following small and large practices toward reducing isolation and promoting an inclusive community.

LOCAL POVERTY

Personal practices

1. Do you have acquaintances at significantly different income levels than your own? Are you comfortable in settings that reflect different class cultures than your own? If not, begin your own self-education:

Visit a place frequented by people who are of a different income level than your own, perhaps an inner city or rural diner, a public health clinic or county hospital emergency room, a main bus or railway station. Drink a cup of coffee or tea. Sit and pay attention to your feelings, negative and positive, toward the people around you. If you like to write, keep a journal. Without staring at people, think in your mind about people one by one. Imagine each one as made in the image of God. Then monitor your feelings. Pray for the well being of each one. Go back to the same place two or three times until you feel safe enough to get curious about the people you see around you.

Imagine you are looking through a wide angled lens at your work place or another setting in which you spend much of your time, including your church. Do you know everyone's name, including the maintenance staff? If not, introduce yourself.

In what ways are you genuinely curious about human beings who are different from you?

2. If you do have acquaintances in different class cultures, are your acquaintances people with whom you work? Are you in a role of power over them? How does this condition the way you see them? Think of a person you work with that you have "power over." Imagine this person as a possible friend. Imagine this person or these persons individually as made in the image of God and pray for his/her/their well being.

3. One way to become comfortable with people who are different from you is to volunteer in a setting that specifically serves the very poor. Volunteer for a specified period of time in a setting where people are very poor. Imagine the people with whom

you volunteer as made in the image of God. Imagine the people with whom you volunteer as interesting people. How do you experience them as a means of grace? How would you say there is mutuality in your relationship? If a number of people in your congregation are involved in volunteering, form a support group to talk over joys, discouragements, and how you experience your volunteering as a means of God's grace.

4. Familiarize yourself with various web sites that provide up-to-date information on children and children's projects. Many web sites are listed at the back of *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Abingdon, 2000).

Congregational practices

1. Almost every congregation has poverty within its local surroundings, but middle class congregations may overlook the poverty in their midst. With a group of people from your congregation, study poverty in the area served by your church. Get the census statistics. Identify vibrant organizations that help low income people. Identify low income housing. Find out how many children qualify for free lunches. Identify health patterns that may be specific to your community.

2. Evaluate your own congregational life for its openness to people of all income levels. What practices within the congregation would you have to change in order to make a wide range of people feel comfortable in your congregation? How do you know?

3. Develop a congregational network of people who are willing and able to do *pro bono* work for poor persons, so, as needs arise, you know whom to call on.

4. If you are thinking big, what opportunities might there be in your community to develop multiple income housing? What might you as a congregation do to welcome people of mixed incomes into your congregation?

INTERNATIONAL POVERTY

Personal practices

1. What are the international populations living near your home?

2. People from different nations, including nations of the developing world, are often of different religions. Have you visited their places of worship? Are you comfortable there in their worship? If not, make arrangements to visit their houses of worship. If possible, use some of the ideas listed above to become comfortable.

3. Do you have migrant workers or refugees in your neighborhood? Where do they work, where are they housed, how are they fed and clothed, what are their working conditions, do they have any church life? Are you comfortable with them?

4. There is no substitute for international travel and study in countries of the southern hemisphere. Participate in a trip sponsored by your denomination. Or, when you travel on your own, find ways to talk with people from a variety of walks of life.

Congregational practices

1. Develop a partner relationship with a congregation in another part of the world. Learn about the life, hopes, and needs of the people of this congregation.

2. Take a congregational trip to New York City to learn about the church's work at

the United Nations. You can arrange such trips through your denomination at the Church Center for the United Nations.

3. Study the many documents related to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the World Summit for Children, and the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the Child. Follow also the International Conference on Financing for Development (Monterrey, Mexico, March 18-22, 2002) and Rio+10: The World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, South Africa, September 2-11, 2002).

4. If you want to think big, work with the overseas missions of your denomination to develop medical services and economic development in places where institutions such as schools and orphanages already exist. ❧

Kathy Reid is pastor of Austin Menmonite Church, Austin, Texas, and author of several church school curricula for children, including Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: A Curriculum for Children Ages Five through Eight, and Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: A Curriculum for Children Ages Nine through Twelve.

KATHRYN GOERING REID

I first became aware of the statistics about child abuse when I was pastoring a wonderful United Methodist church in Northern California. When I invited the kids down to the front of the sanctuary for the children's time, nearly seventy-five children of all ages came forward. They were lively, excited, and energetic. They were a blessing to their parents and to our congregation. As I learned about the pervasiveness of child abuse, I came face to face with the reality that some of these children had already experienced abuse or would experience abuse. The reality is that child abuse can be found not only in our communities, but also in our congregations.

In recent years, our society has also begun to understand the pervasiveness of child abuse. While to some the facts seem like "old news," for many people within churches the statistics about child abuse seem overwhelming and unreal. It is estimated that one female child out of every three will be sexually abused before she is eighteen years old.¹ One male child out of seven will be sexually abused as well.²

While many would like to believe that incidents of child abuse are declining, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released a study in 1996 which reports a significant increase in the number of children whose lives are directly affected by abuse and neglect. In 1986, 931,000 children experienced abuse. In 1993, 1,553,800 children experienced abuse. This is an increase of 67%.³ Whether we are ready to admit it or not, child abuse is increasing in American culture. Child sexual abuse is not confined to any racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic class. Nor is it confined to non-religious homes. Many victims of child abuse participate in church activities without ever disclosing the hurts and difficulties that child abuse has caused in their lives. Not only does the church need to address the issues of child abuse and neglect, the church needs to educate parents, children, church leaders, and others on prevention. That means breaking down the walls of denial and admitting that child abuse takes place sometimes even in our church families.

Only now are we beginning to research the effects of abuse on children. We know that children who are abused may grow up to abuse others. Some estimate that seventy-five percent of all adolescents involved in prostitution, both female and male, are survivors of prior sexual violence: rape, incestuous abuse, or molestation.⁴ Over fifty percent of juvenile sex offenders were sexually or physically abused as children.⁵ The

abuse experienced by children, especially young children, appears to explode into countless emotional problems that affect everyone in our society.

How does the church respond? Our tradition and Scripture clearly mandate the necessity of care for those members of society who are the most vulnerable. Perhaps the most general way that the church has extended help to children has been to promote the stability and security of children, safe within the structure of the family. The purpose of the family is to protect and provide for the children in the family's care. But many of the church's programs assume that children are "at risk" only if they live outside families. Many church members believe that child abuse is something that happens only in "unchurched" families, "broken" homes, or "dysfunctional" families. We have allowed ourselves to believe that children in families, particularly "good" Christian families, are safe from abuse.

Perhaps the first and most important response of the church to child abuse is a commitment to educate ourselves about child abuse and recognize that child abuse can happen even in church families. The effects of education can have a significant impact on the problem:

- It breaks through the individual and societal silence and denial that have long supported and tolerated sexual abuse of children and adolescents.
- It increases access to community resources for treatment and intervention by young people.
- It decreases the level of public acceptance of sexual abuse.
- It increases the degree of understanding and awareness by adolescents and preadolescents of the issues related to sexual violence.

We also need to be willing to talk about the problem and to pray for those who are victimized. In addition, the church needs to focus Christian education programs on prevention of abuse. Implementing policies that screen those who work with children sends signals that child abuse will not be tolerated. All of this starts the process of letting people know that the church is a place to come for help and the church is a place that takes seriously the mandate of Christ to protect those who are most vulnerable in our midst.

Even when we want to, most churches are not prepared to effectively help victims of violence. Rather than reaching out to survivors, the church makes people feel broken and defective. Our sermons too often leave the victim feeling like God is punishing him or her for past sins and offenses. Our religious education programs, established to teach our children Christian values, often reflect our lack of attention to issues of sexual violence.

After becoming more aware of the prevalence of child abuse, I made myself a promise as a pastor that when I prayed the "prayers of the people" I would mention victims of domestic violence. I would pray for those who suffer hurt by the people who are supposed to care for them. I would pray for healing and wholeness for those who have experienced violence. The response from the congregation has been overwhelming as people have come forward seeking healing from their own experiences of abuse.

Just naming the issue has broken down walls of denial and allowed people to grow spiritually.

We need church school curricula that reflect our basic belief that we are all created in God's image, that children are special to God, and that God seeks justice for the victim and repentance for the offenders. These strong messages help prevent child abuse and also promote the healing of victims. God's loving care provides a vision of hope and healing that can enable those victimized to grow spiritually as they grapple with difficult issues of justice and hurt.

The effects of child abuse are devastating. When the very people who are responsible for a child's care violate that trust and hurt the child, that child grows into an adult who has serious questions about justice, healing, forgiveness, and other deeply spiritual issues. It is the obligation of the church to create safe places where prevention is taught and healing can happen.

NOTES

¹ Diana E. H. Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (New York: Macmillan, 1983).

² David Finkelhor, *Child Sexual Abuse: New Theory and Research* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

³ "Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Summary written by Andrea Sedlak and Diane Broadhurst, September 1996.

⁴ Jennifer James, Principal Investigator, "Entrance into Juvenile Prostitution," August 1980; and "Entrance into Juvenile Male Prostitution," August 1982.

⁵ Juvenile Sex Offender Program, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington.

John Williams is the J. T. Stratton Brock Director of Church Relations at Austin College in Sherman, Texas. He received the B.A. from Austin College, the M.Div. from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in American religious history at Southern Methodist University. Williams is founder and director of the Austin College ACTivators program.

JOHN D. WILLIAMS

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.

—I John 3:1

Since the fall of 2000, several Austin College students have been working on a regular basis with children and youth at Presbyterian Children's Homes (P.C.H.), a Texas agency with facilities in Austin, San Antonio, Duncanville, and Itasca. These students participate in a variety of Presbyterian church events with P.C.H. kids.

This is a unique program for both Presbyterian colleges and P.C.H. agencies, and its pilot project, "Operation P.L.A.Y." ("Presbyterians Love All of You"), is intended to develop into a way to foster relationships between Presbyterian college students and kids at Presbyterian children's homes.

The use of the term "at-risk" youth is certainly appropriate when discussing the young people with whom Austin College students have been working. The circumstances of their lives are such that they easily could forget—or never believe in the first place—that they are beloved and gifted children of God, people to whom God has given gifts to be shared with the rest of the world. It is important to recognize, however, that the Austin College students and staff who participate in this program are "at-risk" as well. As surely as failure to recognize one's status as beloved and gifted children of God threatens the ability to live fully the abundant life for which we have all been created, so, too, do the tendencies toward complacency, arrogance, and condescension that characterize the lives of many mainstream, comfortable, educated Christians. This is a program in which "at-risk" people work together to try to make appropriate response to God's grace as it has been made manifest in all of our lives.

Operation P.L.A.Y. is a program of the Austin College ACTivators. The ACTivators are a group of Austin College students who work with the Office of Religious Life to plan and lead regional Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) youth ministry events. Since 1995, the ACTivators program has involved more than 300 Austin College students (153 in 2001-02) who have traveled over 55,000 miles to plan and lead 176 events in nine states (Arkansas, Colorado, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas) involving more than 11,000 youth, children, and adults.

The basic premise of Operation P.L.A.Y. is that children, youth, and adults at the agencies are not ministry receptacles, they are ministry partners. This program is self-consciously intended to be ministry with—as opposed to ministry to or at—people (staff and clients) from Presbyterian Children’s Homes. The design of Operation P.L.A.Y. follows the model of Jesus’ interaction with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:5: When Jesus came to the place (the tree where Zacchaeus had climbed to try and see Jesus), he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down for I must stay at your house today.” Three of Jesus’ actions in that verse have proven helpful as we have developed this program.

First, Jesus went to the tree. Rather than waiting for Zacchaeus to step into his path, Jesus went to the tree and addressed Zacchaeus there. In similar fashion, the development of Operation P.L.A.Y. began, not with Austin College students waiting for P.C.H. youth to show up in their fields of vision, but with visits to P.C.H. facilities. The relationship between ACTivators and P.C.H. clients began when ACTivators went to the turf of “at-risk” youth and met them there. It involved participating in worship and recreational activities that were part of the normal routine for P.C.H. youth. The fact that ACTivators knew some songs that the P.C.H. choir knew, and learned some songs from them that they hadn’t known before, went a long way toward creating an environment in which all the parties involved were comfortable and at ease. As the program has developed, both P.C.H. youth and ACTivators have changed their behavior patterns, but such changes were never preconditions for participation in the program.

The second important feature of Luke 19:5 is that Jesus knew Zacchaeus’s name. We are not told how it is that Jesus came to know the name of the short man in the tree, but he clearly knew it. The significance of knowing names is not to be overlooked. Knowing and remembering and calling names is an important way of communicating to people that they matter.

One feature of Operation P.L.A.Y. is that ACTivators accompany P.C.H. youth to Grace Presbytery youth ministry events, serving as their adult sponsors. Youth from P.C.H. have remarked that having these cool college students accompany them to these retreats is good because “it’s nice to have somebody there (other than P.C.H. staff) who knows my name.” These P.C.H. youth also seem to enjoy knowing the names of ACTivators whom they are likely to encounter at these events.

ACTivators report similar experiences. In the development of relationships based on mutual appreciation and common recognition of the presence of grace in our lives, it is good both to have someone who knows your name and to have someone whose name you know.

Finally, it is significant to note that, in Luke 19:5, Jesus presumes that Zacchaeus has things to offer. He does not say, “Get down here, I’m going to fix you.” He says, “Hurry down, because you have something to offer.”

This important model for ministry, evoking the gifts of others, has been helpful in the development of Operation P.L.A.Y. The young people at P.C.H. have not necessarily been treated as gifted people with something to offer to the world and to the church. As part of the program, ACTivators and P.C.H. youth have gone together to churches

or service agencies and done joint projects in which they shared their gifts with others. These service projects have been a profound part of the experiences of ACTivators and P.C.H. youth.

Operation P.L.A.Y. is a program in which Austin College students and youth from P.C.H. work together to act like the beloved children of God that they all are. It is an effective program because no one involved—P.C.H. youth, P.C.H. adults, or ACTivators—is entirely sure who is giving and who is receiving. It is not a program in which some fortunate people do something to some less fortunate people. Rather, it is a program in which a variety of people, from a variety of backgrounds, “walk together among the good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Eph. 2:10).

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Please join the discussion on our **online bulletin board**, accessible through the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary web site: **www.austinseminary.edu**. Like the current issue of *Insights*, the electronic site hopes to foster ongoing conversation about children and the church. Our desire is to provide a venue in which people can share ideas, ask questions, and make observations related to the topic of this issue. From time to time the authors of this issue’s articles will drop by the discussion to listen to your comments and add their voices to the conversation.

Simply click on the bulletin board link that presents itself on the home page. After registering, you will be able to access this new feature, read and respond to the ongoing conversations, or perhaps start one yourself.

**The online discussion will be open
from April 20 to May 18, 2002.**

HEARING THE CRIES, HEEDING THE CALL THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY WITH AT-RISK CHILDREN

CHARLES "CHUCK" MENDENHALL

A baby requires the certainty that he will be protected in every situation, that his arrival is desired, that his cries are heard, that the movement of his eyes are responded to and his fears are calmed.... While the infant can scream for help, he relies entirely on those around him to hear his cries, take them seriously, and satisfy the underlying needs.... The only possible recourse a baby has when his screams are ignored is to repress his distress, which is tantamount to mutilating his soul....¹

—Alice Miller

The cries of a child are cries for the most basic of human needs—the need to belong. Question One of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” and the answer is, “That I belong—body and soul. . . to Jesus Christ. . . .”² For child and adult alike, it is important to live in a kingdom where cries are heard, where safety is provided, where souls are comforted and tended, where in and through Christ we have a sense of belonging.

In the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus details what it means to belong in God's kingdom. “Ask,” Jesus says, “and it shall be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matt. 7:7). Wow! What a kingdom! Whoever asks, receives; whoever searches, finds; whoever knocks can come in. God is gracious and generous. God can be trusted to comfort and share every good gift with God's children.

Chuck Mendenhall is interim president of Presbyterian Home for Children in Talladega, Alabama, and was a founding co-chair of Presbyterian Children's Homes and Related Ministries, an organization that comprises Presbyterian children's homes and service agencies throughout the United States. He holds an A.B. from Davidson College, an M.Div. and D.Min. from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and a Ph.D. from the School of Theology at Claremont, California. An ordained Presbyterian pastor, he is a licensed professional counselor and licensed marriage and family therapist.

To drive home this point, Matthew tells us that Jesus offered two rhetorical questions. “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone or for fish, will give a snake?” (Matt. 7:9-10) In the kingdom of God where ask and receive, seek and find, knock and enter are inseparably bound, the logical answer to these questions is an emphatic “No!” Parents are there to meet the life-giving and life-building needs of their children. In the kingdom, it is pure and simple—we can count on it.

But if we look around us today—on our streets, in our neighborhoods, across town, around the country—our sensibilities would tell us that this is not so. It is almost as if we live in a different world from the one Matthew is presenting. Ask these questions to a child protective services caseworker. Ask them to children in foster care. Just stop for a minute and ask them honestly to yourself, “Is there anyone who would give a child a stone instead of bread or a snake instead of a fish?” The tragic and truthful answer is an agonizing “Yes.”

Gaze around and our eyes see far too many children who are crying out for the nourishment of love, guidance, friendship, affirmation, but are instead receiving the crushing stones of neglect, poverty, abuse, hunger, disease, and rejection. They hunger for recognition, for stability, for safety, but they too often are stricken with the venom of hate, violence, distrust, and anger. The statistics smack us in the face and club us over the head.

In the state of Texas alone:

- one out of every five children is classified “at risk,” and every thirteen minutes a child is reported abused or neglected;
- one out of every four children has no health insurance, and every thirty-one minutes a baby is born to a mother receiving no or late prenatal care; and
- one in four children live below the national poverty level, and every five minutes a baby is born into poverty.

Over the past ten years, during one of the most robust economic growth periods in the history of this country, the number of children in the United States who are living in foster care increased by thirty-five percent.³ For many in our country today, being a child is hazardous to one's health.

In a climate like this, there is no sense of comfort or belonging. Asking and receiving, seeking and finding, knocking and entering come unhinged. In an atmosphere like this, children who ask are often ignored; children who search get lost; and children who knock have the door slammed in their faces.

And even more tragic than this is the insidious notion which children develop in these situations that this is the way life is supposed to be. A loaf of bread can look a lot like a stone and a dried fish can look a lot like a snake. When children are continually offered the wrong one, they begin to confuse the two and think the stone is actually bread and the snake actually is a fish. “Oh,” they say to themselves, “I guess the bread of life is violence, anger, aggression, condemnation, distrust, and indifference since this is what I have been given.” They know nothing else, and so they are doomed to repeat

the cycle over and over again—giving to their children stones rather than bread and snakes rather than fish. It is in this way that young souls are mutilated from generation to generation.

The results of this mutilation of the soul are devastating. Children who are victims of chronic abuse and neglect are stifled in their emotional, social, spiritual, and educational development. They have difficulty in successfully bonding throughout their lives. Their attachments—to others and to the Savior to whom they belong—are erratic. These children either attach too quickly—even desperately—on the one hand, or remain distant, detached, and cut off on the other. Their ability to grow into relationships where trust can be exchanged and built over time in the experience of sharing with others is lacking. Thus, they are either easily conned and used by others when they trust too readily, or they live with a chronic suspiciousness and distrust of those who would attempt to befriend or encourage them. Those of us who deal with these children see this every day and find their recovery a slow and arduous process.

It is not a pretty picture. Indeed, it is a far cry from the picture Matthew paints. And for those of us who take our stand in a kingdom where we trust in God to provide comfort and belonging to all of God's children, this stone-tossed, snake-infested way of life which engulfs many of the children around us is intolerable. We cannot wait for chronic and persistent abuse and neglect to take an ever increasing toll in the lives of young children. We must act now.

*We are guilty of many errors and faults.
But our worst crime is abandoning the children,
Neglecting the fountain of life.
Many things we need can wait.
The child cannot.*

*Right now is the time bones are being formed,
Blood is being made, senses are being developed.
To the child we cannot answer TOMORROW.
The child's name is TODAY.⁴*

—Gabriela Mistral

Children at risk need us today. That is why we in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) lifted up the year June 2000 through June 2001 as the “Year of the Child.” It is why at the 213th PC(USA) General Assembly, the decision was made to extend this “Year of the Child” into a “Decade of the Child.” And it is why we as the church—the Body of Christ—want children to know they belong, body and soul, to Jesus Christ. To this end we are diligently engaged—right now, today—in our homes, schools, churches, and communities in efforts to bring the asking, searching, knocking of our children back into proximity with the receiving, finding of God's good gifts and the welcoming into God's kingdom.

I am excited about the things I see going on in many congregations to extend the

baptismal embrace to children who are asking for bread. Earlier this year, I was crossing one of our seminary campuses and saw a hoard of children, aged two to four, toddling and racing across the quadrangle in front of me. I had been told to keep an eye out for them as they were part of the ministry of a nearby Presbyterian church to children of homeless parents. The church provided day care while the parents were out trying to secure jobs, education, and housing.

I waved and shouted hello and these kids began swarming in my direction with their hands out like I had something to give them. As they got closer, I realized they had acorns in their hands and they were showing me what they were doing—collecting acorns. I squatted down to their level and they began chattering and climbing over me and clamoring for my attention.

“Look at these!”

“See mine!”

“Here, hold these!”

While I was asking the group about what acorns were and what they did, there was one little boy who was very persistent in wanting to tell me something. He kept grabbing my face with both hands and turning my head so we were eyeball to eyeball. “Hey, I'm talking to you,” he said finally.

“OK, What is it?” I said.

“Did you know if you plant an acorn in the ground it will hatch and a squirrel will come out?”

I paused for a minute considering my answer. “Well, I thought if you planted an acorn, it would grow into a tree.”

“Yep,” he said as he pointed to me with the last word, “but squirrels can run up trees!”

What a great, great ministry, I thought as I walked away. This is the Body of Christ in action—affirming to children that they belong. And it occurred to me that for a brief moment I was part of it—just stopping, recognizing them, being interested, engaging in question and answer with them. In a brief encounter, they were found, received, and welcomed—and so was I. I need to do more of that stopping and squatting and engaging where children are concerned, I thought to myself. So do we all.

It doesn't take much to extend the baptismal embrace and share God's gifts. And if we in the church do it persistently it will pay off, and these young ones will learn not simply to trust in our occasional and limited nurturing and nourishing, but in the One to whom they belong and who eternally and everlastingly gives so much more.

As the head of one of our fine Presbyterian children's homes, one of my great joys is having the chance to visit with the children nurtured by our foster care. On a visit to one of our homes in Itasca, Texas, I entered the door of a girl's cottage to find Cindy, a nine-year-old, building something on the living room coffee table with Lincoln Logs. She waved me over and said, “How do you like it?”

I looked down to see a crude building with Lincoln Logs scattered in front. “Fine,” I said. “You've done a good job!”

“What do you think it is?” she persisted.

"Oh, no," I thought. "I've dug myself a hole now," and I offered a brief silent prayer for wisdom and discernment and squinted closely at the crude building. Suddenly, in a revelatory moment, I saw a steeple.

"It's a church! It's a church!" I exclaimed. A bystander would have thought I had just divined the winning answer to the "Wheel of Fortune" jackpot round.

"Yeah!" Cindy squealed. "Now what does it say in front of it?"

I looked again at what had at first appeared to be Lincoln Logs randomly strewn around the front of the church. Some rough letters and words begin to emerge. Once again my prayers were answered as I finally caught enough letters and words to guess the bonus round: "In God we Trust!"

"Yeah!" she said.

Well, I was so immediately caught up in thanksgiving that my prayers for inspiration had been answered, that it wasn't until later that it dawned on me that this Lincoln Log church and phrase were an important symbol for Cindy. She had been given stones rather than bread at an early age, but now with the care and nurture of the church, things were beginning to come together for her. Ask and receive, seek and find, knock and enter a safe home. These words were beginning to pair up for her. Through the continuous support of the church, she was beginning to learn that she can trust in God. Crudely now at the beginning—as crude as a Lincoln Log church and lettering—but with the continued nurture and love of all of us, this important first taste of God's good gifts will become the solid nutrient of a grace-filled life for her and for all of God's children who need to know to whom they belong.

As the Body of Christ whose mission it is to share the bread of life, I urge all of us again, during this "Decade of the Child," to dedicate ourselves to gathering in those children, like Cindy, who are abused, neglected, marginalized, and have known mostly stones and snakes. It is not only our call and mission, but our privilege and delight to embrace them and bless them in the name of Jesus Christ. ❧

NOTES

¹ Alice Miller, *Banished Knowledge: Facing Childhood Injuries*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 1-2.

² "The Heidelberg Catechism," *The Book of Confessions* (New York: The Office of the General Assembly PC[USA], 1983), 4.001.

³ Taken from Children's Defense Fund Internet web site: www.cdfactioncouncil.org.

⁴ Gabriela Mistral, *Poemas de las Madres/The Mother's Poems*, trans. Christiane Jacox Kyle (Cheney, Wash.: Eastern Washington University Press, 1996), 12.

CHILDREN AND FAMILY IN THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

A bibliographic review by John E. Alsup, D Thomason Professor of New Testament Studies, and J. Andrew Dearman, Professor of Old Testament, Austin Seminary

Perhaps the place to begin a study of children in theological perspective is with an edited volume by Marcia Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). There are chapters treating the views of saints such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and Barth. A reader is not overwhelmed by footnotes, but is introduced to a seminal thinker's views on children by a recognized expert. Another edited volume, this time on the family, is Stephen Barton's *The Family in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996). His volume begins with chapters on the Old and New Testaments, followed by essays on various topics related to the family, children, and Christian faith. Both of the volumes provide a competent overview of their subject matter.

There is a wealth of information on the topic of children and the church in Diana Woods' scholarly collection, *The Church and Childhood: Papers Read at the 1993 Summer Meeting and 1994 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical Historical Society* (Manchester: Ecclesiast Publications, 1994). Barbara Pitkin has written an insightful essay of nineteen pages with the title *Are Children Human?* (Theology & Worship Occasional Paper No. 12, Presbyterian Church [USA]). Volume 52/2 (1998) of *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* treats the topic of family with essays on the Bible and on modern perspectives. Austin Seminary is represented in this issue by Andrew Dearman, who writes on the family in the Old Testament, and John Alsup, who reviews the 1996 book edited by Stephen Barton (noted above) on the family.

With respect more particularly to biblical interpretation, there are two volumes in a larger series, *The Family, Religion, and Culture*, edited by Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison and published by Westminster/John Knox. Both volumes are reliable guides to orient a reader to the topic of families and children in the Bible. One is Leo Perdue et al, *Families in*

Ancient Israel (1997); the other is David Balch and Carolyn Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (1997). The subtitle of the latter volume indicates something of the discussion over terminology. Both Old and New Testament alike frequently use the term "house/household" to approximate what in English is called the family. The series edited by Browning and Evison is not yet complete, and several more volumes are projected.

Roy Zuck has written a volume covering both Testaments, *Precious in His Sight: Childhood and Children in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). Two books concentrate on the Gospel traditions and children: Hans R. Weber, *Jesus and the Children: Biblical Resources for Study and Teaching* (World Council of Churches, 1979); and Stephen Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Halvor Moxnes has edited an extensive study of the family/household in the early centuries of the Christian faith, *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997).

The "household codes" in early Christian instruction (e.g. Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1), which discuss the roles of family members and slaves as disciples of the risen Lord, present both challenges and insights for modern Christian appropriation. There are treatments of these texts and issues raised by them in the books edited by Barton and Balch and Osiek noted above. Also, John Alsup has addressed these and related issues in an article published in German in the volume, *Kirche und Volk Gottes* (ed. O. Merk; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000). An English version of the article, "Discovering the Church as Oikos," can be obtained by contacting the author. Additional bibliography on the topics of family, slavery, and Christian discipleship can be found at the interactive Internet web

site www.netcom.com/~jealsup/bi216.html, where one should scroll to “exegetical topics” and then “Philemon / bibliography.”

There are a large number of studies dedicated to what may be called children at risk. For some of the contributing factors to children at risk, see Phyllis Kilborn, *Children in Crisis: A New Commitment* (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, 1996) and Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994). Regarding sexual abuse, Hilary Cashman's, *Christianity and Sexual Abuse* (London: SPCK, 1994) provides a helpful introduction to an awful subject. On the broader subject of violence, see Phyllis Kilborn, *Healing the Children of War: A Handbook for Ministry to Children who have Suffered Deep Traumas* (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, 1995); Carol J. Adams, *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Source Book* (New York: Continuum, 1995); and Joy Osofsky, *Children in a Violent Society* (New York: Guilford, 1997).

Over the years Harvard researcher Robert Coles has demonstrated a marvelous insight into the lives of children, along with close attention to their religious life. Three books to note in particular are: *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990); *In God's House: Drawings of Children At Risk* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and *The Moral Intelligence of Children* (New York: Random House, 1997).

COUNSELING WOMEN. A NARRATIVE, PASTORAL APPROACH, Christie Cozad Neuger. Fortress Press, 2001, 264 pages, \$18. *Reviewed by Ralph Underwood, professor emeritus of pastoral care, Austin Seminary.*

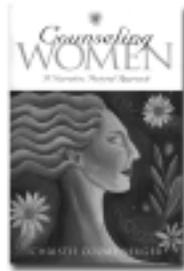
Christie Cozad Neuger is professor of pastoral care and pastoral theology at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, St. Paul, Minnesota, where she has taught since 1992. With James Poling she has also written

The Care of Men (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). Her latest work, *Counseling Women*, has the purpose of resourcing religious leaders who counsel with women.

Three principles guide the organization of the book. The first is the principle of beginning with particular experience, personal and cultural, in order to engage in critical dialogue with the traditions and theoretical approaches of pastoral theology. The intent is that new practices emerge from this dialogue, and it is Neuger's hope that the practices she proposes will be tested in the lives of women who come for pastoral counseling. In setting the stage for this methodology, Neuger discusses the revolution in knowledge occasioned by gender studies. This epistemological development provides significant perspective on the prevalence of patriarchy in our culture.

A second principle is embodied in a feminist-oriented, four-phase framework for pastoral counseling. The first phase is helping women come to voice. This involves listening to women in a manner that helps them to feel respected and believed, and that enables them to discover their own authentic experience. The phase entails resistance to all cultural forces that prevent or hinder such self discovery and full participation in community. This phase is very supportive and at the same time calls on pastoral counselors to question inconsistencies and gaps in what women counselees say in order that they may discover their own true voice. The pastoral counselor is called to be a respectful advocate for women. Neuger elaborates on this phase of counseling in the context of domestic violence.

The next phase is gaining clarity. This involves helping women to develop distance and perspective on their experience. Going beyond telling and hearing the story, this phase reflects on “How do we know what we know?” (128). What sources have generated damaging or limiting self-understandings? Such clarity comes through continued questioning of the interests of dominant groups in one's culture, reframing, and restoring. The context that Neuger chooses to elaborate this phase of gaining



clarity is that of women's depression.

The third phase of the author's framework is helping women to make decisions, and the context on which the author focuses in order to examine this phase is aging. Finally, the counseling task helps women to stay connected to sources of support and wisdom.

This fourth phase calls for an ongoing processes of developing healthy relationships, relationships of “hard dialogue and deep connection” (234, a phrase borrowed with acknowledgment from Carol Hess). The role of community is sufficiently central that the author envisions group care as the primary form of counseling or as an adjunct to counseling.

Narrative counseling theory is the third organizing principle represented in this book. Neuger emphasizes the promise of narrative theory for counseling with women. Guided by narrative theory, counseling begins with the person's problem-laden story and proceeds to separate the person and the problem so that the problem no longer can serve as the person's identity. To make meaning of their lives, people selectively focus on certain aspects of their experience to the neglect of other elements which do not become featured in persons' stories. Narrative oriented counseling looks for exceptions to the problem-filled story of the counselee and helps the person to attend to other aspects of her experience. The process of deconstructing a story and reinterpreting it (reframing) opens up possibilities for living “more abundantly and less problematically” (55). This theory assumes that reality is socially constructed, that personal, familial, and cultural stories maintain realities. By helping women discover new language and interpretive tools, narrative counseling helps generate new stories and thereby new realities. Neuger quotes Bill O'Hanlon, who holds that the heart of narrative therapy is “its fierce belief in people's possibilities for change and the profound effects of conversation, language, and stories on both therapist and client” (56).

This book has numerous strengths. It is wise, I think, to call for both vigorous support for and substantive challenge of counselees. Neuger is aware of theological themes vital to

pastoral ministry. She is guided by four themes: prevenient grace, the power of community in the body of Christ, the need for many images to represent the divine presence, and the biblical theme of the Exodus. Neuger also envisions the connections between pastoral counseling and other pastoral roles.

While well written, the book is idea laden in that it discusses theories and offers few actual stories. Extended presentation of feminist and narrative theories in combination with precious little in the way of actual narratives seems anomalous. One case, only about one page long, effectively illustrates the meaning of moving from an inaccurate understanding of a problem to an accurate one and separating the counselee's identity from the problem (139, 140). This is the longest story in the book, and almost the only one. The book would have far more impact were it enriched with detailed narratives that illumine the central concepts of the counseling process. Neuger's discussion of her phases and of narrative theory are sufficiently concrete for her to suggest and illustrate particular pastoral responses in the counseling process. For example, the following is a “reversal response” to a battered woman who believes that she should not break her marital covenant: “Could it be that the covenant was broken with the first blow?” (144).

The areas of domestic violence, depression, and aging, discussed in three chapters of the book, are informative and helpful. Equal attention to topics such as anxiety would have advanced the book in terms of addressing major women's concerns brought to pastoral counseling.

This book is a significant contribution to pastoral care of women. It affords pastors and other religious leaders the opportunity to explore in greater depth the resources of a feminist approach to pastoral counseling. ❧

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PAYING ATTENTION, PARENTING, AND PRAYER

DAVID H. JENSEN

Hannah Grace Jensen—age two-and-a-half—takes her time when she, Molly, and I walk to the park together. Shipe Park lies a mere three blocks from our home in central Austin, but when Hannah Grace leads the way, the journey can take an hour. At this pace, we obviously cannot sandwich this walk between errands on a weekend; it requires patience, attention, and a willingness to leave the wristwatch at home. Along the way Hannah Grace may run or walk backwards (a new skill she’s acquired since our move to Austin), but mostly she stops and pays attention.

Molly and I take parental pride in planning activities for our daughter, perhaps a bit too much pride. Our goal on these walks is to get to the park, so that Hannah Grace

David Jensen is assistant professor of Reformed theology at Austin Seminary. He earned the B.A. from Carleton College, the M.A.R. from Yale Divinity School, and the Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. Jensen is the author of In the Company of Others: A Dialogical Christology (Pilgrim Press, 2001).

can climb the playscape and be with her neighborhood friends, and so that Molly and I can laugh and commiserate over the trials and joys of parenting with our neighbors gathered with their children. Usually this is not our daughter’s goal. Hannah Grace considers the same landmarks along the way every day: she pets our cat; she lingers over the rose in the corner of our yard; she stoops to touch the fence that surrounds a neighbor’s flower bed; she sticks her nose into a crevice of a pecan tree; she traces her finger over letters embedded into the sidewalk at the corner of our street; she yells “hello” to the cactus on the next block (another oddity since our move to Texas); she glances skyward whenever she hears a bird or an airplane; and, when the park finally emerges in sight, she breaks out running, sometimes stumbling over a bump in the pavement. Hannah Grace Jensen pays attention. All things can hold her interest; in her eyes all things are new and have a life of their own: the cat, the rose, the cactus, the fence. Hannah Grace considers these things and invites her parents to do the same.

On some days, the walk seems interminable and results in our frustration. Molly and I, too, want to go to the park, visit with the other parents, and share in adult conversation while our children talk and play with each other. On those days we take Hannah Grace in our arms over her loud protestations, hoist her on our shoulders, and walk the three blocks in short order. Once she gets to the park, we figure, she’ll be happy. But on other days—and these days are becoming more frequent—we take the walk at Hannah Grace’s pace and pay attention just as she does. Some days, in fact, we don’t even make it to Shipe Park.

During these travels with Hannah Grace, I am reminded that a good part of parenting consists in paying attention. When I look at the things she notices, when I run my hand alongside hers over the lobes of the cactus (the one on our street, thankfully, has lost most of its spines), I am invited to pay close attention to the world around me and to my daughter. Her attention spills over into her questions and these questions form the edges of a conversation: In the echoes of those questions, “Why, Daddy?” the world is unfolding for Hannah Grace abundantly and mysteriously. When we pay attention as children do, when we listen to their questions, our children will thrive. And, when we ignore them, they, like all of us, can become disconnected and despairing of the love that surrounds us in God’s world. As I take these walks with Hannah Grace, I am reminded that human beings are not made for themselves. Perhaps this reminder is also embedded in Calvin’s conviction that we are not our own, we are God’s.

In one of her essays, Simone Weil writes, “prayer consists of attention.”¹ For the past six months, Hannah Grace has been praying: before dinner, before bedtime, and occasionally outside these appointed times of the day. As she folds her hands while lying in bed or clutches our hands around the dining room table, Hannah Grace utters nearly identical words every day: “Thank you for Shipe Park, all my friends, Mama, Dada, my school...” None of these prayers, doubtless, would be included in a contemporary devotional guide—the phrases are too simple and the concerns too mundane to make any spiritual bestseller list. Molly and I have told Hannah Grace that prayer is a way to talk with God, and she smiles when she hears this. I don’t presume to know if she understands prayer; such presumption intrudes on a conversation that is uniquely hers.

(Do any of us understand prayer?) Yet in these prayers Hannah Grace pays attention to those people and things in her life that are most meaningful—the events and relationships that help form the person she is. As routine as these prayers are for her, they also reflect some of the ways in which my daughter’s eyes are open to God’s world, and the way the God who creates in love calls her to pay attention. In this same essay Weil claims that prayer “is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.”² I don’t know if Hannah Grace prays like this; I know that I often do not pray with this degree of attention. If attention is a prerequisite to prayer, however, Hannah Grace lives her life strikingly prayerfully; her life and prayers, moreover, are invitations for her parents to live more attentively themselves.

Hannah Grace Jensen takes her time with things. With each day that we spend together, I find myself more captivated by her uniquely childlike way of paying attention, especially in the midst of a consumer society that refuses to pay attention. Each careful step on the way to the park, each moment of lingering over the letters on the sidewalk or the snail on a fence post, is an opportunity for Molly and me to do the same. Parents who pay attention to their children, I’m convinced, can also learn from them, even about matters as “adult-like” as prayer. Is this staggering realization that children can teach adults also behind Jesus’ claim in the Gospel of Matthew: “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matt. 18:3-5)? Children play an intriguing role in the ministry of Jesus, in that they sometimes serve as models for the life of discipleship. When I watch Hannah Grace and the way that she, too, pays attention, this saying of Jesus comes alive for me again.

Nearly every afternoon the three of us follow the now familiar path to Shipe Park; doubtless, these travels will continue as long as the route holds my daughter’s interest. When Hannah Grace takes our hands on these walks, I can’t help but think that she’s also inviting us to pray, pay attention, and open our eyes to God’s world. When I take her hand and share that walk, I’m thankful to be her dad. I look forward to many more afternoons of wandering, no matter how long it takes us to reach our destination. ❖

NOTES

¹ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1973), 105.

² *Ibid.*

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