

Nurturing Children in Faithfulness

BY BOB FOX

When we say children are “the church of the future,” we push them away from the center of the life of the congregation and imply they will become important only when they mature. These authors remind us that children are a key part of the church family right now. By shifting away from more impersonal, instruction-based models that predominate in Christian education, they urge us to nurture children’s faith through communal interaction and involvement.

The children who stream into our churches every week are brought by parents or other caregivers for a variety of reasons. Perhaps Dad and Mom simply desire a moment of peace or free childcare. Maybe they have some notion that contact with the church will be beneficial to a child’s socialization or psychological health. Others may want to hand over a child’s faith development and religious instruction to the “experts” who teach in the church. Still others may hope to partner with the community of the church to train and disciple their children in a holistic fashion.

These children, regardless of the reasons they are brought to church, are a sacred trust for the congregations that receive them. The three books examined here urge the community of faith to take the developing souls of children more seriously. In *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 2nd ed. (Morehouse Publishing, 2000 [1976]; 143 pp., \$14.95), John H. Westerhoff III questions

many of the assumptions in the educational models appropriated by the church from the secular sphere. Marva J. Dawn's *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997; 256 pp., \$16.00) urges the church to be directed more toward leading children into the radical demands of faith and away from the siren calls of culture. While Westerhoff is concerned with method and Dawn is focused on result, Catherine Stonehouse in *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Baker Books, 1998; 237 pp., \$18.99) describes child development theory in both secular and religious contexts.

Two common threads run through these works. These writers are convinced that the church has not been intentional enough in meeting the needs of the children in its trust, and they warn that the very future of the church is at stake when it considers their education and faith development. Furthermore, they are convinced that a faithful *community* must play an integral role in nurturing children's faith. With these commonly held presuppositions, each author in a distinctive voice offers prescriptions for nurturing faith in children.

HOW IS FAITH GROWN?

Instructively, the problems John Westerhoff identified in *Will Our Children Have Faith?* over a quarter of a century ago continue to plague the church. His forming question is simple, "Is schooling and instruction in a Christian community necessary for education?" (p. 17). The church, he suggests, wrongly follows secular models of education that emphasize schools and instruction. This leads congregations to classroom-teach religion (a knowledge-based approach) to passive children, but to ignore the development of active faith (which is interior and interpersonal). Children, as a result, learn a great deal about the Christian religion but do not receive instruction on how to grow in their faith.

Westerhoff proposes a very different educational model, "a community of faith-enculturation paradigm," in which children learn their faith through experience with and practical involvement in a faithful community (p. 45). The community's task is to relate the faith, which it imparts to children, to the totality of human experience and the reality of the divine presence. Its goal in faith formation should be conversion, in which faith given is transformed into faith owned and incorporated (p. 36). The "ideal" church to promote the growth of children, he notes, is unified in its essentials, small enough to encourage real relationships, multi-generational, and formed by a variety of spiritual gifts. Ritual, experience, and faithful action are all ways that such a community inculcates faith.

Because the instruction-based model that predominates in Christian education for children is too impersonal and abstract, Westerhoff recommends shifting to a method based on communal interaction and involvement. If an individualistic instructional method is inadequate as a way to

explore questions of faith, perhaps the better guiding query is “What does it mean to be Christian *together*?” He identifies four stages of faith: “experienced faith” that is an inactive encounter with the faith of others; “affiliative faith,” which is choosing to belong with a community of faith; “searching faith” that embraces doubts and experimentation; and “owned faith” (known traditionally as conversion) in the sense that faith possesses its holders. Children at each of these developmental points require different types of educational experiences. The final chapter of Westerhoff’s book sketches ways that a church might restructure its educational paradigm and programs in order to better address the faith stages of its members.

Will Our Children Have Faith? is a valuable resource for anyone attempting to radically reshape a congregation’s educational program. Updates at the conclusion of each chapter in the reissue edition (Morehouse Publishing, 2000) reflect both the developments in the author’s thought as well as the church’s current situation.

WHAT DOES A CHRISTIAN LOOK LIKE?

While Westerhoff writes from the perspective of the mainline denominational traditions, Marva Dawn’s *Is It a Lost Cause?* takes a more evangelical perspective. Her guiding conviction is that the church should be an alternative community to the world in which it exists. The purpose of Christian education is to lead children away from the world and into a life-changing discipleship in the community of the church.

The world outside of the church, Dawn says, is governed by powers and principalities, and it suffers the pain and moral malaise of the postmodern. Our ministry to this distress is complicated, and it can easily be compromised by our tendency to project problems outside our selves and our community. For instance, we would be naïve

to identify these needs, marked by symptoms such as violence and casual sex, as belonging only to other people outside the church, and thus to deny that they are also our problems. The pain and temptations of the world are prevalent even in our churches and can easily ensnare our children.

The answer to the beguiling call of the world is to seek instead the heart of God, which is revealed in a variety of ways. Scripture reveals God’s heart through the form of a meta-narrative, an all encompassing

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story of how God has addressed the needs of the world. God's heart also is revealed through the church as an alternative society; it not only provides community, which is a desperate need in the postmodern world, but also teaches its members how to live in Christian relationship with each other. Through the church's true worship and the love and nurture of pastors and parents, God reveals his intentions for humanity.

Empowered with God's direction, the church can aggressively confront the world and can help its children de-emphasize cultural conditioning. In practical terms this means challenging the media and its enticing portrayals of consumerism, violence, and sexual promiscuity. For instance, children need to be shown that pain is a part of life and can have value, rather than being taught by the media that commercially-provided ease and comfort is the point of life.

Dawn's answer to the title question, "Is it a lost cause?" is a qualified "no." If the church aggressively seeks to produce counter-culture children, then it will recover the heart of God for its children. Her book would be a good candidate for group study; thought-provoking discussion questions at the end of each chapter encourage readers to come to their own conclusions about the dominant worldviews of our culture.

HOW DO CHILDREN GROW?

In *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, Catherine Stonehouse applies to a Christian context the important insights from child development research. Her very readable summaries of the generally-accepted theories of human development can help us carefully accept, qualify, or reject their application in the church's efforts to educate its children.

Developmental approaches, Stonehouse argues, are a way to understand each child's progress towards "the goal of spiritual formation... [which is a] maturing faith and a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ, through which we become more like Christ in the living of our everyday lives in the world" (p. 21). She begins by surveying Scripture for examples of the education of children, and discovers that tradition, ritual, symbol, and community are biblical models for the journey of faith formation.

After summarizing the work of Erik Erickson on the psychosocial development of human beings, Stonehouse proposes that "human development and spiritual formation are not two separate, unconnected processes" because both spheres address trust, hope, will, and purpose (p. 63). Applying the theory of intellectual development proposed by Jean Piaget, she urges Christian educators to allow the differing stages of a child's cognitive development to determine the approach they take in forming the child's faith. She then considers Lawrence Kohlberg's research into the role of community in the moral development of persons; the community of the church should model and provide a place for children to explore the moral grounds that underlie actions.

These models of general human development are not the only important factors according to Stonehouse. While young children may not be cognitively ready to form a picture of God, they do have an image of God based upon their experiences with their parents and caregivers. This image becomes fully developed through nurturing into a mature conception. She concludes her survey by examining James Fowler's account of faith development as the defining of a center of value, an image of power, and a shared master story.

She utilizes these developmental insights in a practical model for worship that includes silence, story, and response (which involves constructive application of the lesson to craft materials). Stonehouse views children as pilgrims on a journey. Though their paths are varied, they encounter dangers in the disintegration of extended families and modern culture, but support and resources in the blessings of community.

Stonehouse's book provides an excellent review of the vast field of child development theory. The results of this research are very helpful for any adult in understanding the needs and abilities of the children they serve.

A COMPELLING PICTURE IN THREE PARTS

Often we speak of the children of the church as "the church of the future." Yet this attitude pushes children away from the center of the life of the present church, suggests they have little to offer now, and implies they will become important only at some later point when they are mature. These authors remind us that children are a part of the church family of the present. How we nurture them today will determine if the church has a future at all.

Each author calls on churches to be more intentional in their education of children; though their approaches are different, each ultimately affirms the importance of the community in faith development. When read together, these books will initiate a helpful conversation on the role of the church in nurturing children in faithfulness.



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