

Reimagining Children in the Church

Are you longing for a deeper way of nurturing the children in your church? Something that offers substance and depth, something that helps children engage with the Christian story in a way that draws them in? In this booklet, Tiffany Robinson and Valerie Michaelson share what they have learned from many years of practical experience with children in the church, and from reflecting theologically on their experience. They remind us of the richness of the gospel, and offer us original and practical tools for use in our own ministry context. This booklet will help church leaders, parents and congregations who want to be better equipped to welcome children into their midst and to nurture them in the Christian life.

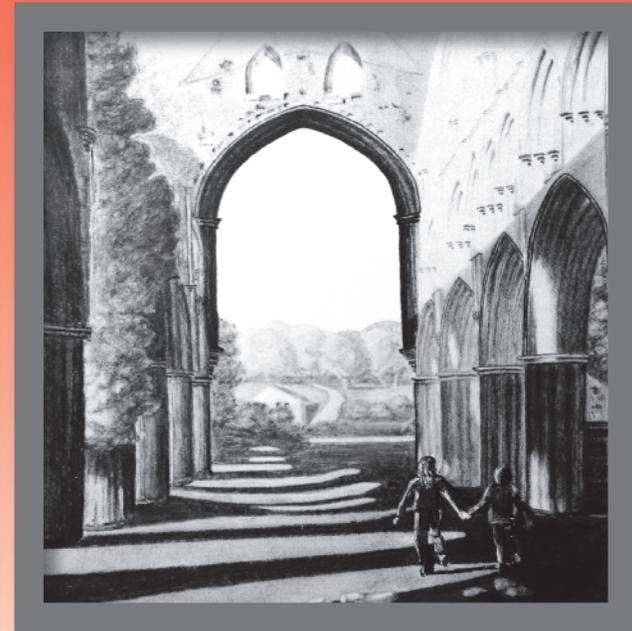


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Reimagining Children in the Church

**A fresh approach to raising
our children in Christ**

TIFFANY ROBINSON & VALERIE MICHAELSON

A WYCLIFFE BOOKLET

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TIFFANY ROBINSON and
VALERIE MICHAELSON

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THE WYCLIFFE BOOKLETS

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How Trinitarian Love Shapes Youth Ministry

FROM VISITOR TO DISCIPLE

Eight Ways Your Church Can Help

REIMAGINING CHILDREN IN THE CHURCH

A Fresh Approach to Raising our Children in Christ

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Introduction

ONE OF US RECENTLY SAT IN CHURCH during the baptism of a toddler. The little boy was surrounded by parents, godparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. He was further surrounded by all the children of the church, crowding around the font to catch a glimpse of “one of their own” being baptized into their Christian community. This precious child was still further surrounded by several hundred congregants who were participating with vigorous promises of support for this child as he grew up in Christ.

This triggered mixed feelings. Here was one of the moments in the life of the church where we most see and celebrate the utter grace of God in our salvation. Here we bask in the depth of God’s love for us that far outweighs anything we ever *do* as Christians. Here, too, we mark our participation in that grace on behalf of the child. We make solemn promises to be the arms and hands of God in that child’s life that he might grow into a mature follower of Jesus.

And yet ... mixed with the hope was some cynicism. This family had never been seen at church before and it was unclear if they would come back after this celebratory event. Did they see this celebration as some kind of magic protection for their vulnerable little boy? Was baptism in this church a family tradition (or pressure from a well-meaning grandparent)? Or did they, with the Reformers, understand this baptism as the beginning of a life-long apprenticeship to Christ?

Not that it is only the adults who might be confused. Would the children gathered around the baptism font be able to answer even the most basic questions about what had just taken place? Later that same morning, a boy was overheard telling his father that Sunday School had been “lame and random,” a sign of the frequent disenchantment with Sunday School by the age of eleven or twelve.

The great sixteenth-century Reformer and theologian John Calvin believed that baptism stood as the pledge and prayer of the church community “to take seriously the status of children as full inheritors of God’s covenant.”¹

And yet, this particular baptism was a clear reminder that we as a church often do not know how to live out that covenant with our children throughout their lives. One contemporary theologian interprets baptism as signalling “the church’s calling to be a sanctuary for children.”² This is a marvelous image of nurture, safety, welcome, reliability and guidance. Yet sadly our churches, regardless of whether they share this view of infant baptism or not, do not always function as sanctuaries for our children. Nor are they places where children are able to feel deeply at home over the course of their lives.

In a culture that increasingly isolates, entertains, and markets to children, we as a church struggle to know what it means to be a “sanctuary” for our children. We struggle to know how to build into our children, from an early age, the depth and riches and demands of the Christian gospel. We struggle to know how to give our children the best opportunity

possible to live and grow within God’s community so that they are given a chance to know and love this God deeply and fully. We struggle not only with *what* to teach children, but *how* to teach it effectively.

In this booklet, we address this struggle. We propose an approach to raising children in today’s church that recovers some of the wealth that the gospel has to offer. This model, which we invite you to explore, has been tested and tried in many churches over the last decade, and has been first imagined and then developed by many people in the church who care deeply about children, about the church, and about God. We are not proposing a whole new program, the need to hire a new, dynamic leader or encouraging you to purchase an expensive new curriculum. Instead, we propose a more modest way forward. We want to provide a vision for children in the church that has theological depth and pedagogical substance. We also want it to be simple, easy to use and a lot of fun.

Maybe your church does not have a lot of children. Maybe your church is having trouble recruiting teachers. Maybe people cannot stop talking about the good old days when the Sunday School was overflowing, and do not seem to have a hope for the future. These are real and practical issues. Our proposal is that a congregation should take a step back and consider the kind of spiritual space they can provide for children. We hope that this handbook will help churches nurture the soil out of which a vibrant intergenerational ministry can flourish, no matter how many children are there. We hope this handbook will be something that any church—even a small

church that does not have a children’s ministry or a church building—can use with the people and materials that they have at hand.

Our goal is not to help you grow a big Sunday School, nor is it to convince you to make radical and immediate changes in your church. (This kind of goal is not only unrealistic, but often can be destructive in a community anyway.) Instead, our goal is to encourage you to *start* on a journey of actively shaping a “sanctuary for childhood” that nurtures the children God has brought to you. We hope to give you tools that will help you create a learning and worshipping environment that truly communicates God’s good news to children and empowers them to find their place in his work and in his world. We want to help congregations be better equipped to welcome children so that they can be apprenticed in the Christian faith for the sake of becoming Christ’s body in the wider world.

SECTION 1:

Church, Children & Childhood

Imagine if the church in our own time became known as a “sanctuary for children.” Imagine if the Christian church developed a reputation in our culture as a safe and nurturing place for children, characterized by imagination and wonder, joy and play. Imagine if your church was a place in which God’s story could not only be heard but entered into and a place in which the adults in God’s family came alongside the children and youth in meaningful relationships of mentoring, prayer, genuine community, and deep joy and delight. This sort of sanctuary would be an extraordinary gift to the culture around us, in our often fragmented communities and frenzied time.

Instead, we often see—despite good intentions—declining numbers, difficulty in recruiting teachers, tight budgets, curricula that feel hard to use, and children who are baptized and then disappear from church. The realities of contemporary life press on us from all sides: busyness, tiredness, over-commitment, confusion about our own faith journey, Sunday sports and activities, and lack of family time.

Somehow, the net result is that the church culture around raising children in the Christian faith often feels moralistic, stale and tired. Children and leaders alike can feel frustrated by the anemic nature of Christian teaching, and the lack of a way to teach the fundamental and life-giving nature of the gospel for everyday life. Even though many children will agree that

church is “a nice place,” there is often not much evidence that their involvement is having a transformational impact on their lives.

While some churches are blessed with many children, others may feel that having a Sunday School is no more than a fading memory or an idealistic future hope. We would not know where to start in teaching them, let alone where all the children would come from. And even when we do have children in our churches, nurturing them towards a mature Christian adult life with Jesus, within the context of the worshiping life of the church, is a rare accomplishment, even for the most established of programs and experienced leaders.

In the midst of these very real challenges, we need reminding that the church has an extraordinary gift to offer our children and families. Indeed, the church can offer unique wisdom and practical help in navigating the stressed, anxious, consumerist culture in which most of us live. We suspect that what our children and families not only long for but need desperately are some of the things the church is most naturally gifted to offer. The way forward for nurturing children in the church is not a fancy new program or curriculum, but a holistic, integrative way of thinking about children in the church that flows out of the fullness of life offered to us in Jesus Christ, such that our church communities become “a sanctuary for children”—and for childhood—in our own place and time.

In the first half of what follows, we define nurturing of children in the church as “catechesis.” We then explore some

of the cultural barriers to good catechesis, followed by a look at some of the barriers to good catechesis within the church.

In the second half of this resource, we propose three ways forward for congregations, each accompanied by multiple practical application points. We believe that theology, not curriculum, leads Christian teaching, just as it leads every part of church life. This handbook is rooted in a theology that tells us following Jesus is meant to give us the fullness of life—not mediocrity—and that the church has the potential to invite our children into a taste of what this life can be in their own lives.

SECTION 2:

Catechesis: What It Is & What It Is For

Rooted in the Bible, Church, & Community

Martin Luther, writing before his break with the church of Rome, said that “if ever the church is to flourish again, one must begin by instructing the young.”³ One of his first goals in desiring to cultivate a healthy church was to teach children the basics of faith. Building on the medieval idea that all things precious are known “by heart,” Luther developed a method of instruction-by-memorization he called catechism, from catechize, to “echo back,” or “teach out loud.”⁴ The Greek word *kata* means “down” and *echein* means “to sound.” (You will notice it shares a similarity with the word echo.) That means catechesis quite literally means “to sound down.” The teachings, doctrines and stories of the church and of the Christian faith are sounded down, not only into our ears, but into our lives. They are sounded down through generation after generation of God’s people in the church: the teachings and stories of Jesus himself alongside of the stories of God’s engagement with the people of Israel.

We could say that catechesis involves the oral teaching of the Bible and of Christian doctrine—and we would be right. But it is also more than that. Catechesis is the formation of understanding, character, and practices in the lives of children and adults to enable them not only to understand, but *to enter into* the fullness of the Christian life.

The fundamentally biblical roots of catechesis give us a powerful example of the importance God’s people placed on nurturing children in faith. In the book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites are given a passionate mandate not only to learn God’s commandments themselves, but to pass them on to their children.

Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9, *The Message*)

In the New Testament, Paul points to the passing down (or “sounding down”) of the faith from Lois, to her daughter Eunice, and then to her grandson Timothy (2 Tim 1:5). We learn from Paul that even from childhood, Timothy has known the sacred writings that instruct one in salvation through faith in Jesus (2 Tim 3:15). Lois and Eunice are some of the earliest known catechists in the Christian church.

Over hundreds of years, the western church has developed many approaches to catechesis, but most have a few things in common. A catechism is designed to teach the basics of the Christian faith in the church. It is also meant to support what parents are doing in the home, so that children might live out the Christian life most fully. This means that supporting parents and equipping them with tangible tools to nurture their children in Christ *in the home* is a vital part of catechesis.

Thirdly, the whole church community is involved in this training and nurturing of the child.

In the Anglican church, the tradition of the writers, this communal commitment to the catechesis of children is very clear. Every time Anglicans celebrate a baptism, the community makes some powerful promises. The celebrant asks: “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?” The community enthusiastically answers: “We will.” Over and over again, the commitment is made to support and nurture our children in their life in Christ. In this way, we are in effect making the commitment to support catechesis.

With that in mind, let us define what catechesis is for.

An Invitation into Fullness of Life

The Christian story is about life. In catechesis, we promise to support children in a distinct kind of life: their “lives in Christ.” Jesus said: “I have come that they might have life and have it to the full ...” (John 10:10, NIV). This “life” we are drawn into by Jesus is received in the context of our ordinary, everyday lives. But it is common both inside and outside of the church to see “salvation” as being about some distant life *after* death or about “going to heaven when we die.” Theologian N.T. Wright, in line with the theology of the church over the centuries, challenges this view and instead offers an understanding of salvation as something we enjoy “here and now (always partially, of course, since we all still have to die), genuinely anticipating in the present what is to come in the future.”⁵

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The Christian life is not limited to the saving of souls, but is about whole human beings (body, mind and spirit) entering into the new life that God has made possible through Jesus here and now. The Christian life is not lived in some distant future, but is the beginning of deeply living and tasting God’s good plans for us and for his world.

Second, despite good intentions, the church has all too often embraced the error that puts a set of rules or a particular moral order at the heart of the Christian faith rather than a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This leads to much of our teaching suggesting that the Christian life is primarily about keeping a moral code rather than living the new life in Christ through the Spirit. The inevitable result is that we treat the Bible as a “manual of ethics, or moral values, of religious ideas, or even of sound doctrine”⁶ rather than a manual of worship that invites us into this new way of being in the world through a relationship with God.

Of course, the Christian life *does* carry with it a particular understanding of morality. But that morality flows out of this deeper understanding of the gracious actions of God on our behalf. When we begin with morality rather than with God, the form that morality takes usually says more about *our* concerns than it does about what matters to God.

When we focus on teaching our children how to behave rather than helping them to see the world and ourselves in light of the dynamic and active presence of a sustaining, redeeming and creative God, we all lose out. We end up teaching them that the focus of the Christian life is on their effort

to be a certain kind of person for God, rather than joining with God in God's continuing redemptive work in the world.

This focus on behavior as an end in itself rather than as a response to a relationship with the living God has shaped many of the curricula used in teaching children about the Christian life. Our children learn very quickly that following Jesus is more about our moral behavior (first, not lying about sneaking cookies, and later, not taking drugs or having sex) than it is about a relationship with God.

take out "and"? Catechesis at its best invites God's children into the fullness of life promised in the Christian gospel. It is not about some future life and nor is it about a narrow, moralized definition of life right now. Instead, we want our children to learn that the life Jesus offers to us in the gospels is an invitation into *a whole new way of being* in the world as God's people and as citizens of God's kingdom.

A Whole New Way of Being

For the church to exist as a life-giving community for its children, it must invite its members into a new way of engaging with and being in the world through Christ. This is not always popular, and often looks strange to the world around us. Bishop and theologian Lesslie Newbigin writes that we must embrace the politically incorrect worldview that makes it clear that discipleship means being committed to a vision of society radically different from that which controls our public life today.⁷ It is from within this radical vision of discipleship that

church leaders can equip children to navigate the complex and often destructive culture around them with courage, with hope, and with support from within the community of the church.

Bishop Newbigin's vision of the church is a hopeful one. He imagines the church as being "a place of joy, of praise, of surprises, and of laughter—a place where there is a foretaste of the endless surprises of heaven."⁸ He is not naively suggesting that life in the church is without struggles and challenges. But he is suggesting that, at its best, the church points us to the full re-creation that God will one day bring about "on earth is it is in heaven." **If Bishop Newbigin is right then,** while the church is certainly far from perfect, its potential to be a transforming power in the lives of our children is extraordinary.

We inhabit a broken world. But the church, through the life-giving power of the Trinitarian God, invites us into a new way of being in this world. This means that our children's "apprenticeship to Christ" will not only involve a foretaste of the kingdom of God in all its joy and redemptive wholeness, but it will also teach them to be a critical voice and presence in a still-fallen world. Teaching and forming our children for this life, *this whole new way of being*, is the heart of catechesis.

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Barriers From Without & Within

A Hard Look at the Culture Around Us

While the Bible story itself is about new life in Christ, in twenty-first century western culture, we are up against profound challenges in terms of the culture in which we live. Most of us live lives that are deeply disconnected from the natural world. Our cultural environment is one of a shallow, vague spirituality in which impersonal technologies dominate our imaginations. This culture is anxious and hurried and there is little sense of place or communal story. Young people are pulled into the frenetic, over-sexualized, fast-paced adult world at an increasingly early age.

While every culture is a mixture of glory and brokenness, and there is a lot that is good in our culture, if we are to craft a catechesis for our time wisely, we must be aware of what the cultural influences around us are, and how they shape our lives and our catechetical efforts. What is more, we must be aware of aspects of culture in our modern western world that are destructive, and which entice our children to build their lives upon premises not in keeping with the rich fullness of life that Jesus offers to us.

The following list of books gives just a taste of research from the last decade that explores the relationship between our culture and children. It is helpful for us to look at this as we reflect on what some people are concerned about in our culture—and what our children need from us in today's church.

The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon;

Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys;

The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids;

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder;

Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—And More Miserable Than Ever Before;

The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement;

Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends & Other Realities of Adolescence.⁹

For any parent, this list of topics might well cause alarm as it draws attention to trials and challenges that our children face every day. But it is no secret that the culture around us is hard for our children to navigate. From concerns about our disconnection from nature, to our addiction to success (and limited understanding of what success means), to the rampant consumerism in the world around us, and the complex issues involved in navigating the internet, being a child today is no walk in the park, for boys and girls alike.

At the same time, these books do not represent the only cultural elements that are present in the western world. There are encouraging reports from many corners (both sacred and secular) about people and groups who are seeking a deeper way.

For instance, in his most recent cross-Canada youth survey, sociologist Reg Bibby writes that he is hopeful about teens in Canada, finding that they value things like friendship, trust and honesty and are “still mostly healthy, morally decent folks.”¹⁰

While Bibby’s report is encouraging and all the news is not bad, the many arguments about the interconnected and destructive trends that are manifest in countless ways in the culture our children are inheriting are very real. These are not nurturing conditions, and yet all of these aspects of our culture have shaped the church as well. Some have even been affirmed and encouraged as intrinsic to the Christian life.

A Hard Look at the Culture in the Church

We all want to keep our children in the church. None of us want them to be bored or disengaged. But often, to accomplish a well-intentioned goal we have reached for the lowest common denominator, letting the entertainment-based popular culture around us—rather than good theology—guide the process as we seek ways to nurture our children in the church and to lead them in catechesis. Sometimes what we do with our children—the materials we use, the prizes we give, the food we eat—look suspiciously more like Disney World than they do like the counter-cultural message of the crucified and risen Christ.

These features of children’s catechesis create an atmosphere that make it difficult to then catechize them about the deeply formative calling of the gospel on their lives and all the more

so as they become teenagers. From an early age, our children are taught to be passive consumers instead of agents of faith living out a radical, counter-cultural and transforming story with their lives.

Allowing the predominant culture of our time to uncritically shape the foundation of and direction for our ministries results in a shallow telling of the gospel story that generally has very little transformational impact on the lives of God’s people. And the cultural pressures that are allowed to shape ministry to children and teens in the church prevent the church as a body from living out the full potential of her calling to nurture God’s children in the Christian story, and to live out a profoundly counter-cultural calling in the world in their turn.

As discouraging as this cultural landscape may sound, we are deeply hopeful that in the church, we can invite our children into a different way of being in the world. In what follows, we will present a way of thinking about catechesis that will enable a church to grapple with how to shape a catechesis, both in form and content, which is more aligned with the gospel call on the church to be the body of Christ in the world.

*I changed
Disneyworld to
Disney World*

SECTION 4:

Catechesis Reimagined: Three Models for Raising our Children for Life in Christ

There are many exciting ways we can rethink and reimagine catechesis in the church, ways that will help us participate with God in inviting our children into the richness and fullness of life in Christ. For this booklet, we have chosen three. *Catechesis at its best is intergenerational, embodied and storied.* For each of these models, we have presented a theological basis and also suggested what it might look like in your own ministry and church setting. In our desire to address both the watering down of the gospel through shallow cultural influences, and the boredom and restlessness of kids due to bad pedagogical methods, these models knit together the good news of the gospel with teaching methods that are appropriate to how children learn and grow.

Do not try to do everything! Read the following pages prayerfully, and imagine where God might be leading you and your church community. Sometimes pages of ideas can be overwhelming, but here is a strategy for sanity: choose the one idea you like best or that you think might fit best in your own church. Try it. If you like it, try it again. If it does not work in the ways you hope it will, prayerfully evaluate, and then either try it again or try something else. (Remember, lots of good ideas do not take the first time they are tried.)

Try giving this booklet to someone else in your church and see if God moves them to try something as well. Many people will think of more helpful ideas: please share them. Nurturing our children in the Christian faith is vital, and the more people who are doing careful theological reflection that flows into loving, creative ministry the better.

MODEL 1: INTERGENERATIONAL

The Bible does not tell us much about the childhood of Jesus, but the one story we have is very telling. In this story (found in the second chapter of Luke's Gospel), Jesus and his parents go from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover, and on the way home they get separated. This is not necessarily a problem, except that the distance from Jerusalem to Nazareth is about 70 miles. (For those of us who live in Ontario, that is the distance from Kingston to Brockville.) We learn that a full day passes before Mary and Joseph start wondering where Jesus is, check in with the relatives and the wider community, and finally realize he is missing.

When we read this story through our own cultural lens, we see parents who walk halfway to Brockville before they realize their child is missing. The normal response might well be to put in a quick call to Social Services to check these parents out. But in Jesus' cultural context, the web of intergenerational community is so strong that Mary simply trusted this community would care for and look after her child.

The story ends well: Mary and Joseph head back to Jerusalem and find Jesus teaching in the temple. (He asks, “Where else would you have expected me to be?”) We look at this story not to call into question the parenting skills of Mary and Joseph! Rather, because this is the kind of interconnected community that we believe God intends for the church. This is a web of relationships shaped by every person in the church, which holds our young people in prayer, practical help and love. Young people are growing up in a very challenging cultural context and they need us. They need this web of support—this gift of being known and held—in God’s family.

When children and teenagers are isolated from the adult world, which for a variety of reasons often happens, “there is little room for the dialogue, observation, interaction and mentoring necessary for young people to learn adult values.”¹¹ This isolation has significant repercussions. Children and teens do not learn from their peers or from the internet what they need to learn to be healthy, mature adults. If we want our teens to learn to drive a car, we do not set them down with the internet or with a bunch of peers to talk about how they feel about driving. We go with them, mentor them, drill safety guidelines into them, and carefully help them navigate something exciting, yet potentially dangerous, making sure they have all the tools they need to succeed and thrive.¹²

Similarly, if we hope our children and teens will learn how to live into the fullness of the Christian life, we must do much better than leave them to learn the skills and wisdom needed from the internet and their peer group. All of us must take the

time and effort needed to invest in deep, long-term relationships with them. In this way, we might do well to think of catechesis as an apprenticeship in living the Christian life. In his excellent book, *Family Based Youth Ministry*, Mark Devries writes:

Teenagers won’t learn the skills required of mature adults in a peer-centred youth Sunday-school class. They won’t learn these skills by talking with their friends. The maturation process occurs as the less mature have repeated opportunities to observe, dialogue and collaborate with the more mature. By denying teenagers opportunities for this kind of involvement with adults, our culture sends its youth into the adult years relationally, mentally and morally unprepared for the challenges of adulthood.¹³

However we structure our children and youth ministry, whatever curriculum we decide to follow, these intergenerational relationships are key not only to nurturing our children in the Christian life, but to breathing life into the tired structures of the church. Not only do our children need us in the church today. All of us—from the youngest to the oldest—need each other.

Something that was once second nature not only in the church but in the world around us is now becoming an endangered practice. As extended families no longer live near each other, and we self-segregate into groups by age, the church is becoming one of the last places in our modern world where there really is the potential for intergenerational community.

Community, in all its complexity and messiness, is one of the main tools God uses to help us discover forgiveness, grace

and hope. This intergenerational community of the church is at the very heart of catechesis and of the Christian life. After the gospel, and the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst, the presence of the diversity in community (the grey hair among us, in combination with the youngest baby in our nursery and everyone in between) may well be one of the biggest gifts the church has to offer, not only to our children in the church, but to the world.

What We Can Do:

Intergenerational services:

- Involve six- to ten-year olds in worship by pairing them up with a leader during the service. They can “apprentice” with greeters, readers, those setting up (and taking down) audiovisual equipment, musicians and those leading prayers.
- Involve four- to six-year olds by providing meaningful tools for children to engage in the service itself. One church created “bingo sheets” with pictures of what happens in a service (praying, singing, preaching, blessing, communion, offering) with stickers where children watched for certain parts of the service to happen, and had then to mark them on their sheet.
- Involve children in festival services in meaningful ways. Create a temporary intergenerational team to plan festival services and involve the children in designing processions, pageants, music, and beautiful props.

Intergenerational events:

- Adapt some of your church’s standard events for children and teens to become events that nurture intergenerational community. Such events as the Sunday School picnic, the Christmas pageant, and so on, can work this way. Conversely, adapt some of the standard adult events so that they too become church events that nurture intergenerational community, such as service projects, a day of prayer, or a seniors’ tea.
- Develop temporary intergenerational small groups around projects (like festival services, or prepping for day camps) so that everyone learns to work and pray together. Recruiting new leaders for these events helps spread the work, vision (and delight) of ministry with our young people around the church, gets other involved, and helps prevent burnout. Children’s ministry belongs not just to a handful of “Sunday school teachers” but to the whole church community.
- Have children help out as active team members during church cleanups or neighborhood based service projects. Give them real jobs to do. This builds into children a true sense of their place and responsibility within the community.
- Have communal dinners with intentional seating, mixing up families and age groups. Play table games together. Have a Ceilidh dance.

Intentional intergenerational relationship building:

- Develop prayer partners between Children’s Church groupings or between adult small groups and groups of children. One church invited thirty people to each purchase a Bible for the thirty teens in the church youth group. The invitation included a commitment to pray for “their teen” for an entire year, to get to know them a bit, and check in with them from time to time on Sunday mornings. Having a specific role laid out—and an invitation and natural way of connecting—freed up the adults to take this on with gusto.
- Families can invite senior citizens in the church community over for dinner and share one another’s stories. Parents can teach children what kinds of questions to ask.
- It is common for parents to ask their children, “What did you learn in Sunday School today?” It is not so common, but vitally important, for parents to find time in the home to talk with their own children about their own faith journey, what *they* learned in church today, how *they* encountered God this week, how the children can be praying for *them*, and how *they* are growing in their own relationship with Jesus.
- Have children make Christmas crafts or other seasonal crafts to be delivered to seniors.
- Invite teens and preteens to spend a couple of hours on a weekend doing yard-work for shut-ins.
- Connect older members with moms and young children. For example, an older member can be a “shepherd” during chil-

dren’s lessons or gatherings, on hand for a child that is fussy or having a hard time. They can sit with them, read with them, draw, and so on. Something as simple as having seniors hold sleeping (or squirming) babies during a service begins to create meaningful connections.

- If your curriculum permits it, bring older members with relevant gifts in to work with the children on a one-time basis (for example, visual artists, scientists, carpenters, poets, knitters, actors, bakers, video producers, and musicians) to create something together.

Communication:

- Communication is *key* to cultivating and maintaining intergenerational connections in the church. Something as simple as a thank you from the children’s ministry to those who support the ministry, whether regularly or one-time, can go a long way towards keeping the different generations connected. These thank you gestures can have a regular spot in the bulletin or be actual notes given out in person.
- Develop a way to regularly have the larger congregation aware of what the children are learning, what they are doing and what their needs at any given time might be. One church published a one-page monthly bulletin insert outlining what was being learned by the children, listing material and personnel needs for that month, prayer needs, contact information for the ministry, and expressing specific thank yous for help received.

- Communicate with parents: nurturing children in the church needs to be integrated and supported with what happens in the home.

One important caveat to note: one could look at each of these examples in terms of *efficiency*—that is, making the ministry run more smoothly through involving more people. In truth, however, involving more people is often *not* more efficient. It takes more time, it takes more communication, and it requires a certain amount of ease and graciousness with the personal quirks we each bring to a task.

However, over time it will mean that a meaningful inter-generational community is built up around the children. This larger net is part of what holds our children as they mature as Christians. It allows a child to begin to have many personal reference points on what it means to be a mature Christian. It allows them to experience the deep reality that being a Christian is to be a participant with others in God’s work, at all stages of maturity and life. It allows them to continue meaningfully to find themselves, in different roles at different times, in *this particular* “body of Christ” in their world.

MODEL 2: EMBODIED

A reality of being human is that we have bodies. We eat; we sleep; we play hard, run fast, become sick and are healed, and eventually, we grow old. This “embodiedness” is also fundamental to being Christians.

The good news for us in the gospel is not an escape from our bodily reality, but the healing and renewing of it. We are intended, as we grow up into Christ, to enter ever more fully into the redeemed use of our bodily and physical reality.

From the beginning, we learn of God’s commitment to all things physical: to stars and galaxies, land and sea, whales, lions and bugs. But the clincher comes in the incarnation—the coming into flesh—of God in Jesus Christ, his Son. This shows us once and for all that God it is not distant, in some super-spiritual realm disconnected from our physicality. It is *in* the raw ruggedness of this real and physical world that God meets us in Jesus: in real time and real space. God “**moves into the neighborhood**” and meets us here, in *this* world. In fact, we aren’t saved *out of the world*, but *are saved into it*.

Does
“moves into
the neigh-
bourhood”
need a
footnote?

This is an amazing reality. We are saved for participation in God’s recreation of the world from within. Because of Christ, we realize that salvation comes to us as creatures, as people with bodies who live, act, love and die within a particular setting and time. While the future reality of heaven is a very real Biblical promise, salvation is about more than a future time or space. Because of Christ, our salvation is about how we live in our current time and space. We are witnesses to what God is doing—affirming, judging, healing and redirecting creation toward its true end—and then *we get in on it*. This extraordinary reality is what we are called to be a part of.

As catechists, we need to consider these radical claims in two ways. First, are we teaching this full-bodied gospel to our children? For example, do we give what we consider their spirit

or intellect priority over their bodies? Have we adopted a shallow theology more focused on “spiritual” ideas at the expense of the full-bodied and radical claims of the gospel?

And second, do our teaching methods support what we are saying about the embodied gospel? Are we willing to reconsider our pedagogical methods so that they actively and vibrantly help communicate that our bodies are included in the good news of the Christian life to our children?

During childhood, while our cognitive faculties are still being developed, being present *in our bodies* is more important than ever. In fact, learning for young children is led by their whole body and the capacity for abstract thinking is not yet developed. The truth of God in their lives is a concrete truth. It is experienced. It is not solely learned as a principle and then applied, as is often the case in some catechetical models. Instead, it needs to be felt, heard, touched and tasted in order for children to truly “take it in.” Even when children begin to develop the faculties for more abstract thought (often around the age of nine), they continue to learn through imagination, play, and creativity. In other words, they continue to learn an embodied gospel through embodied means.

This all means that we are doubly challenged, both theologically and pedagogically, to be rigorously self-critical about how we give leadership to our children from Sunday to Sunday. Do we in the church see ourselves as a place where God’s “new kingdom” is being lived out? Do we see our children’s ministry as a place where children can begin to experience God’s redemptive work in all its breadth and depth? If we

do, we will take seriously that our children need to learn and experience the material, aesthetic, social and spatial truth of the gospel.

The way we teach and the materials we use go a long way in helping our children learn the “whole” gospel. If our long-term goal is that our children serve God with their whole being, life, time, energies and skills, we need to allow them to bring their whole self to the task of beginning to know God and be known by him. We need pedagogical methods and tools that show our children that all of who they are is part of God’s redemptive story and work. Their energy, their senses, their emotions, their bodies, their minds, their hearts—all of these are “tools” for receiving the truth of who God is and what he is doing. All of these things have to be in play in our ministry with children if we expect our children to grow up knowing that God has a redemptive claim, and love for, every aspect of who they are as people in his world.

All in all, *embodied catechesis* means that we bring our minds, our bodies, our feelings, our senses, and our imaginations to the exciting task of being re-shaped by God. If we can find ways to do this with our children, they will have far richer access to the content and meaning of the gospel and to the multifaceted truth that it invites us into. It will also set them up, even if they are not aware of it now, for a far richer engagement with the gospel in teen and adult years.

What We Can Do:

Teaching spaces:

- **Simple:** Our teaching spaces need to help children be present to what they are doing. A major challenge for young children in learning, especially when grouped by multiple ages, is that we live in a noisy, distracting, fragmented world. Children are easily distracted by clutter, and having lots of *stuff* around makes it harder for them to bring their whole selves to what is at hand. Natural light, if possible, and uncluttered spaces help children be present to what is being experienced at church.
- **Beautiful:** To be part of the church is to have a foretaste of a new heaven and a new earth. Central to that new earth is beauty. Note that “beauty” and “decoration” are not the same thing. Take your cues from God’s creative work in creation and consider seasonally decorating your spaces with natural things. Pumpkins, fresh smelling pine and pinecones, pussy willows and Easter lilies are great seasonal additions to a children’s worship space. Invite children to bring in sea shells, beautiful stones, feathers and other “found treasures” of creation to remind us of the gifts of the Creator during our worship time together.
- **A place of worship:** Create a simple worship place that signals to the children that they are entering a different kind of place at church. One congregation got a low table and created a nature scene on it with real rocks, dirt and plants. They then placed a cross in the middle of the scene. This

became the focal point around which the children gathered at the beginning of their worship time. It not only communicated the beauty of what God has made and his affirmation of the world the children live in, but it placed Christ and his redemptive work right in the middle of creation, signaling the whole sweep of the Christian narrative from creation to redemption and to final recreation. Having this as the gathering point week to week for the children acts as a signal that this place, and indeed their whole world, is “God’s place” too.

- **Move around:** If you have enough room available, consider occasionally using an alternative space. One congregation, in recreating Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, gave the children compasses and had them map out Israel’s journey outdoors on the church property. Or, in re-enacting Israel’s scouting out of Jericho, send children as “spies” into other parts of the church, having them observe certain things and report back.

One children’s ministry team found it irresistible to make an ancient looking scroll and hide it in one of the old crevices of the church basement for the children to find when they explored together the story of the boy King Josiah, who found a scroll of part of the Bible in a crumbling wall. It is exciting for children to sometimes change the space they are in, especially in the service of delving more deeply into a story.

Storytelling:

- **Reenact the story:** A powerful tool for embodied learning is reenacting the story. The focus here is not on fancy sets but on enabling the children to “inhabit” the story through their bodies week to week. Basic props (blankets, plain tunics, “sawhorse” stands) can be manipulated into multiple scenes requiring only minimal embellishment to make it specific to the story. In reenacting, it is important that children are given permission to “become” many different characters, good and bad. As they “try on” these characters, they will learn how God in his faithfulness met each one of them, whether Jonah running away from God or Ruth’s loving care of Naomi in her old age.
- **Taste and feel the story:** Don’t just tell children that Christians are supposed to be the “salt of the earth:” have them taste salt and describe what it is like. Give them lots of room to describe it and slowly bridge to brainstorming on why Jesus would call us “salt.” Or, when we say God’s word is “like honey on our lips,” have them taste honey, and then brainstorm about why the author may have chosen those words.

When we say “Jesus is the light of the world,” think through a way that they can experience light in that moment (build a tent and have everyone climb inside, give children turns turning a flashlight on and off) and talk about what light does (it breaks darkness, it helps us see things, it helps us find our way) as a way to talk about Jesus. This simple method can be used with a multitude of biblical images and words.

Food:

- The lifelong rewards of the gospel are learned much more through ordinary, day-to-day habits and we would do well to introduce this to our children early through how we use food. “Instant gratification” is a huge stumbling block to life-long learning in children, and food, in our culture and churches, is too frequently used as a reward or “treat” instead of as basic, enjoyable nourishment.
- Children can occasionally be part of food preparation, perhaps even for other classes or coffee hour. Healthfully sourced and prepared foods can teach a love of how God created natural things so that we can be fed, and it begins to teach hospitality and generosity.

Making things:

- Let children make things related to the story. These can sometimes then be used as props during reenactments. For example, one congregation asked a group of boys to design and build a burning bush for a future drama. They spent a Sunday brainstorming and, using a live bush, flame colored tissue and a fan, created a fantastic bush, which they then operated during the drama. It engendered real engagement with the story, ownership and responsibility, team work, and an appropriate amount of risk-taking—all fantastic ways of engaging them in the story.
 - Have basic, natural, open-ended materials on hand. Plasticine, paper, paints, wood, glues, even hammers and nails, cardboard boxes, beautiful fabric scraps, and staplers are

all good. Use these to give the children a construction job related to the story. Have them build an ark or Elijah's chariot or Jacob's ladder, or a whale. Or have them paint a backdrop. Don't tell them how to do it. Instead, be present to help keep them on task. Have them work in small teams and give them lots of time. You will be amazed at what they create.

Prayer:

- Prayer is learned as an embodied habit. We do it with our whole selves: body, mind, heart and mouth. In a world that is noisy and fast paced, the church offers a deep history of the practice of prayer. The church is uniquely positioned to teach the gift of quiet and stillness through our liturgies and prayers. By consistently practicing certain rituals of worship with our children we begin to teach them that life with God involves our body and its habits. It begins to teach them that we use our bodies and senses in order to be attentive to what God is doing.
- **Move:** For younger children, using movement with prayer can be helpful. Teach them a basic prayer, like the Lord's Prayer, with simple hand and body movements. Do it every week for at least a couple of months so that the words and movements become internalized and "part of their body."
- **Prayer tents:** one way of teaching that prayer is set apart and sometimes a quiet activity is to create prayer tents. This can be done with a blanket over a small table or with actual tents. Encourage the children to go "find their quiet place" and pray.

- **Transitions:** Practice transitioning from noise to silence. Do not be afraid to try this with children even as young as three or four: you might be amazed at what happens! Have all the children sit down and pay attention to all the noises outside (buses, birds, cars, wind), then the noises inside (fidgeting, squeaky chairs, doors closing) and finally noises in their own bodies (breathing, heart beating, words in their head) as a way to consciously slow down before saying a prayer together.
- **Draw it:** More visually oriented children will find it easier to pray if they know they can write or draw a prayer. Give the children a vivid paragraph from the Psalms and have them interpret it visually or by rewriting it in their own words.
- **Jump, dance and shout:** In the Psalms, we see David dancing, shouting and singing his heart out before God. This should free us to do the same as we engage with God in prayer.

MODEL 3: STORIED

At the heart of catechesis is teaching children about participation in God himself and in his work in the world. One of the primary ways we grow in understanding of God and his work is through a life-long engagement with the Bible. Scripture provides us with an incredible tool for teaching children, who naturally learn from stories and stay engaged with stories far more than they do with abstract ideas. The Bible is a living tool and, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, it is the active, speaking Word of God to each generation of the church. Catechesis, for all ages, is fundamentally shaped and informed by the study of Scripture. For children, this has most frequently meant that catechesis is teaching the stories of Scripture and their meaning. And while we agree with this in a general way, we want to challenge the way in which it has often been done.

Teaching single stories and their meaning is lacking in two ways: it isolates the story in the past and it isolates a story within Scripture. First of all, it isolates a story in the past—“this story happened then and this is what it means.” Yes, God’s work is *historical*—but it is an ongoing story, past, present, and future, which he intends for us to help shape. “Historical” does not mean “in the past:” rather, it means that God’s work is intentionally accomplished *within* our space and time, across generations, through people in particular settings, and through their histories.

When we read the stories from Scripture, we are indeed reading about an event from the past—but we are reading about them as characters in the same story as ourselves. We are

part of the community of Moses, Pharaoh, Josiah, Ruth, Mary, Paul, Eunice and Judas. We are part of the same overarching work of God—his story within his creation—that they are. And we are just as much a part of the story as they were.

So when we learn about these Bible characters, we are indeed reading a story that is meant to reflect itself back into our lives, and to shape and change us. This shaping is the work of the Spirit; how it happens is often a mystery and is not entirely predictable. However, how we help children engage with the stories will be an active part of the Spirit’s work in their lives, bringing the world of that story to bear on their lives.

Secondly, teaching single stories and their “one-time” meaning isolates a story within Scripture, when in reality all the stories of Scripture are linked into one larger story. When we teach one story, it is going to be much more richly taught if we as teachers can see how that story is inherently linked to other stories and to the whole dramatic arc or drive of Scripture. When we read Scripture, we are reading primarily the story of Jesus, but this focal story is told through the story of Israel and the Church.

What is more, we are reading it as a way of framing and re-framing our own lives and the storied nature of our existence. Our children, too, are part of God’s story. As we teach individual stories, they need to be meaningfully placed in the larger story of God’s ultimate goal of remaking us and our world.

The other advantage of working to connect Scripture as a whole is that we will be giving our children a much more

complete picture not only of who we are, but of who God is. Often when we tell the Bible stories to children, we tell story after story of heroes (Abraham, the father of Israel; David, God's chosen king and defeater of Goliath; and so on). When we leave out the sometimes messy humanity of the Bible characters, we are only setting up our children to feel like failures in their own lives when they feel they don't measure up. The real truth is that these Bible characters did not measure up either, and they had some pretty dramatic and sinful moments and seasons in their lives, every one of them.

This gets tricky, because as anyone who has ever thought of teaching the story of David and Bathsheba to children will know, there are some stories in the Bible that would have a serious R rating if made into a Hollywood movie. We do not need to tell the children everything at once, but at the same time, we are not doing our children a favour if we hide from them the rugged humanity of the Bible characters. Otherwise, we will never be able to truly find ourselves in the story, in all of our broken and redeemed humanity.

In this way, *storied catechesis* can be understood as teaching our children, over time, that the whole of Scripture is God's gift to them throughout their lives. It can begin to show them that central to following Christ is being "inside" the Christian story—now and at every stage of their lives. The interconnected, varied, strange, familiar, and ultimately life framing stories of Scripture need to be presented in such a way that our children learn that to be a Christian is to be brought into this story throughout their lives.

What We Can Do:

Take your time telling these stories:

- Take several weeks with a story and have a different emphasis from week to week (one week re-enactment, another art, yet another technology) that allows for children to begin to know the story in a multi-sensory and multi-layered way. Taking time to inhabit a story is not—as many adults might think—boring for a child. Given the right tools, they love it. Being given the chance to live a story more deeply is a much more powerful way to learn than simply being told what the story is about.

Allow multiple ways to engage with and respond to the story:

*I italicized
the "The"*

- For younger children this might mean that the story is told through puppetry or acting or reading a very good version of the story. (*The Jesus Storybook Bible* is an excellent tool here and can be purchased with a CD of British actor David Suchet reading the story.)
- For nine- to twelve-year olds, it might mean looking the story up on their own and then creating a re-telling of it. This can be a comic strip version of the story (whether by hand on paper or a big chalkboard, or by using an online tool like BitStrips), by making a video of the story, or by writing a dramatic script of the story.
- Have the children, over several weeks or months, build the "landscape" of the story using foam board, Lego, plasticine, paint, rocks and sticks. One class of six- to twelve-year olds

built a table-sized three-dimensional replica of the landscape of the Exodus stories over the course of a five-month Exodus curriculum. Over those weeks, they were physically engaged in making the story, hearing the story and seeing how the stories unfolded. They could also see how the Bible is connected to real-world geography.

- Use a questioning game approach to engaging with a story. One class made giant dice that had “who,” “what,” “where,” and “when” printed on the different faces of the die. Children would take turns rolling the dice and were then invited to ask the group a question (using whatever word they had thrown) in relation to the story.

The questions themselves can be nuanced by the teacher: “Who are you most like in this story?” “Who would you want to be in this story?” “What happened in the story?” “What would you do differently in the story?” “When did this story happen?” “When have you felt like character X?”

- I-wonder questions.¹⁴ This is similar to the dice but works beautifully for younger children. The leader simply asks “I wonder” questions and invites the children to explore them together. For example: “I wonder what part of the story you liked best?” “I wonder if there was a part you didn’t like?” “I wonder who you would be in this story?” “I wonder what happened next?” The open-endedness of the questions allow for really interesting and surprising engagement with the story.

CONCLUSION:

A Way Forward

Amidst all the very real challenges of ministry with children and young people, here is some very good news: what our children need most to grow and thrive is what the church at her best is most naturally equipped to give. The church is equipped, as the Body of Christ in the world, as a place where children can begin to experience community at all stages of their lives. It is a place in which they are held and guided by the story of God in Jesus Christ as the church community continues to live it out. This story never grows old and is constantly refreshed and renewed as it is re-told in our midst by the work of the Holy Spirit.

The church can be a place where a child’s natural curiosity, energy and love of physical play are celebrated. It can be a place where our children’s contributions in worship and the life of the community are meaningful, and where they are challenged to serve, work hard, and grow. It is also a place pregnant with hints of the fullness of the redemption of all of creation. It can be a place of beauty, of joy, of healing, of being known, a place that connects them to the deeper meaning of being a follower of Christ. It can become a place to which our children love to come because it is a place, in part, shaped to who they are as children. We believe deeply that the church truly can be a “sanctuary for childhood.”

This is no coincidence: God intends for the church to be the new community where together we learn what it means to

be followers of Jesus and to be children of God. It is our conviction that the way forward for the church is not a fancy new program or curriculum. Nor is it new technology or a new staff member.

The way forward for the church today as we shake off tired structures and seek to nurture our children in the deepest way we can is a change of heart, of mind and of imagination. It is a recovery of some of the basic principles of what it means to be God's people on the way towards God's future for us all. It is an embracing of a way of being with children, and of thinking about children in the church that flows out of the fullness of life offered to us in Jesus Christ. It is to return to the basic resources and claims of the gospel itself—that the good news of God in Christ is about *life*.

For our children—indeed for all of us—this life in Jesus is meant to be intergenerational, it is meant to be embodied, and it is found in the storied work of God in the world.

For Further Reading

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Notes

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11. Mark Devries, *Family Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).
12. A similar analogy is found in Devries’ *Family Based Youth Ministry*. This analogy is adapted from Devries’ original idea.
13. Devries, 48.
14. “I wonder questions” were developed by Jerome Berryman in his “Godly Play” curriculum. Berryman draws on years of pedagogical wisdom and experience as a Montessori teacher as he invites children to wonder about the Bible stories. See: Berryman, Jerome. *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

