

Book review

Ann Weber Becker

God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith and Life, by Michele Hershberger. Scottsdale, Pa.: Faith & Life Resources, 2003.

Wherever you find yourself on your own journey, as a seasoned leader or a new disciple, *God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith and Life*, by Michele Hershberger, will be a welcome resource to take along. Intended as a resource for those considering baptism in a Mennonite church, *God's Story, Our Story* is a masterful introduction to Christian faith and life, poised to serve catechetical experiences and other settings of faith development.

A narrative approach guides both the content and the development of this book. Its nine chapters trace the most compelling themes in our understanding of the story of God's relationship with the world from an Anabaptist perspective. Salvation, sin, judgment, grace, discipleship, and justice are all here, but not as disembodied abstractions. Each concept grows out of the story of real people and real events, beginning "in the beginning," wandering with the Israelites, embracing the impact of Jesus, and percolating through the early church era. As the story presses on through the centuries, it focuses on the plot line leading to Anabaptist beginnings, and stretches forward to the present and beyond.

The development of the book was also guided by a narrative approach. As God's story is recited, the stories of Michele and six other disciples are woven into the fabric of the narrative. These people met often during the writing of the book, and their contributions shaped the telling of the story. While I quibble with the publishers' claim that this kind of collaborative approach is unique to this book, I am delighted to see the collaboration documented in a fresh way. The voices of Mike, Rosella, Josh, Luke, Tara, and Mary (ranging in age from thirteen to eighty-

three) are quoted in sidebar sections throughout. Their insights, questions, and affirmations add vigour and contemporary relevance to the old, old story.

Strengths and affirmations

A fine example of the wisdom of a narrative approach may be found in the chapter that explores the coming of the Holy Spirit and the “new creation” experienced by the post-resurrection faith community. After unpacking what she means by *salvation*, the author turns to the biblical stories of Paul, Nathaniel, and Peter. She deals respectfully with Paul’s dramatic Damascus road experience, Nathaniel’s thoughtful decision, and Peter’s inconsistencies. Then Luke Hartman steps in to relate the story of his public commitment. While in hindsight he wishes some things had been different, he understands the experience as a beginning: eventually, he tells us, “my faith came along and I got real with God” (99). This example illustrates the response group’s willingness to disclose their own journeys. The result is an effective—sometimes riveting—juxtaposition of enduring biblical narrative and fresh contemporary story.

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Story, Our Story embraces it. Readers are guided through seemingly contradictory statements such as “God is a mystery . . . yet we know God through Jesus,” and “God is all-powerful and yet gives people free choice” (19). Instead of offering unsatisfying explanations for why the creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 differ, the author acknowledges and celebrates this diversity: “One image of God, one creation story, can’t contain all there is. God is both close-up and personal, far off and beyond knowing” (18).

The notion that Christian faith and growth are necessarily entwined is another helpful assumption. One of the final chapters offers an overview of spiritual disciplines that nourish Christian life: prayer, Bible study, community worship, service, simplicity, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, confession, and

forgiveness. A “growth paradigm” is embedded in the book through the range of ages of those who shaped it. Three of the six members of the response group are teenagers, one is in his twenties, another in his thirties, and the sixth in her eighties. Eighty-three-year-old Rosella encourages a younger friend by saying, “I’m an old woman and I’m still in the wilderness sometimes” (46).

As this intergenerational group met week after week, they must have known serious moments together as well as lighthearted ones; the book documents both. The humour that spills over into the text lends a refreshing spirit without trivialising the content. Truth often sparkles through humor, as when Tara’s comment leads into chapter three: “Okay, we’re at the Promised Land. Can we go home now?” (45).

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of this resource is the way it distills complex themes into simple nuggets. The three chapters dealing with the Old Testament are especially notable in this regard. Making sense of material spanning more than a thousand years is a daunting task for a new student of the Bible, however motivated. Touching on themes such as how God deals with the problem of sin, how judgment and grace are related, and what *shalom* means for responding to armed conflict and economics, the author shows how the “wilderness people” learned to love and follow God. In her preface, Hershberger expresses appreciation for colleague and mentor Marion Bontrager; *God’s Story, Our Story* undoubtedly draws on wisdom gleaned from his biblical literature class at Hesston College.

Issues for leaders to consider

While making complex themes intelligible is a laudable undertaking, one runs the risk of oversimplifying. Hershberger claims that Jesus’ combining of omnipotence and obedient love (even to the point of death) is unique to Christian faith; I suspect that bright young people will be amused to see this claim to uniqueness, however valid, supported solely by a reference from Christian Scripture. More distressing to me is a jab at the science classroom made early in the book, in a discussion of differing views of creation. Beliefs and theories about the world’s origins vary, but proponents of differing views do not divide neatly into

camps: theologians vs. scientists. I witness my sons' probing insights into scientific disciplines and faith, and I am grateful to see that at present they experience no difficulty in holding the two together. I do not want the church to give them the impression that they need to make a choice.

Isolating the above examples magnifies them unfairly, but they illustrate a larger concern. Leaders who use a resource that excels

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in simplifying big ideas will need insight to interpret and add nuance to the distillation. Indeed, leaders will do well to remember that printed materials, however excellent, are only resources to guide and assist them. Other factors may also significantly shape the experience of catechism, including time and place of meeting, the format of your time

together, your own restedness, and the spiritual support of others for these meetings.

Catechetical musings

In recent years, educators have welcomed a fresh approach to understanding how we learn. The work of Howard Gardner and others has identified at least eight distinct ways that we know what we know.¹ These "intelligences" coalesce into unique combinations for each of us, and affect how we acquire knowledge. Verbal/linguistic and mathematical/logical are the two intelligences usually favoured in formal education. Most faith exploration settings also seem to favour these, as well as intrapersonal intelligence, an awareness of the inner self and spiritual realities. Significantly, *God's Story, Our Story* models the exploration of interpersonal intelligence by documenting the interaction of the group that worked with Michele.

But this approach accounts for only half of Gardner's intelligences. What about visual-spatial (graphic representation, finding your way in space), kinesthetic-tactile (mind-body connection, coordination), musical-rhythmic (sensitivity to sounds, structure of music/rhythm), and the naturalist intelligences (communing with nature, growing things)? Does Christian faith touch our minds and souls at all these locations? If so, why not structure our catechetical gateways in ways that are

mindful of the full, glorious spectrum of experience? Do we rely on “getting the thinking right” out of habit, or do we have compelling reasons to focus on this way of knowing?

What is the next step in the journey for catechetical resources committed to walking alongside young people in a postmodern context? Are left-brain intellectual abstractions of faith that get the thinking right essential to embracing Christian faith? Or will other emphases also be valued highly? Will leaders and disciples be drawn deeper into the mysteries of paradox, the diversity of multicultural perspectives, and the imprecision of symbolic expression of truth?

Summing up

I finish where I began, with a wholehearted recommendation of *God's Story, Our Story* to any who seek guidance in leading others in the exploration of Christian faith. Its usefulness includes but is not limited to formal catechism classes.

New parents will find this book valuable for their own nurture as they rise to the challenge of articulating the Christian story in a simple, coherent way with their children. (But please, don't read it aloud with young children; other resources are better for that.) Why not include a copy in the Faith Chest for new parents, if your congregation has such a tradition? Indeed, any disciple who has not had opportunity to take a biblical literature course, and any who would appreciate a refresher course, will be well served by reading through *God's Story, Our Story*.

Tara: Well? Is this it?

Mary: We went through the Story, so now what?

Luke: The Story is still going on in our lives. . . . (154)

Sometimes simple truths are the most profound.

Notes

¹ *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Bks., 1983).

About the reviewer

Ann Weber Becker is ordained in the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada, and is a teacher and freelance writer/musician. She is author of *Faith for the Journey: Youth Explore the Confession of Faith* (Newton, Kan.: Faith & Life Pr., 1997), and executive producer of the *Songs to Live By* recordings (Newton, Kan.: Faith & Life Pr., 1999, 2000).