


Children encounter God

Talashia Keim Yoder

A pathway of fairy lights and cello music brought the people into the sanctuary for the Ash Wednesday service. After Scripture was read, a song was sung, and a few brief instructions were given, those gathered began to explore the stations set up around the room. Young and old together,



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they buried their hands in soil, built vessels out of clay, lit Taizé candles, drank water, washed their hands, took deep breaths, and blew bubbles. Four-year-old Caleb lingered at one station, washing his hands over and over as his mother read the words, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psalm 51:10, NRSV). Across the room, six-year-old Malachi watched, spellbound, as 80-year-old Genny blew bubbles. “You make the winds your messengers” (Psalm 104:4) would never be the same for him. Together, the family of God explored their

humanity, leading to the moment when they would come to the front to receive ashes on their foreheads. The littlest ones sensed the solemnity of this moment and looked at me with young, wise eyes as I traced the cross on their foreheads. Scripture was again read, a song was again sung, and the cello music played us out of the sanctuary.

We each encountered God in our own way that night. The encounter was specific to each of us. Simultaneously, it was an encounter of community, made possible by the body of Christ—the whole body of Christ, including the young.

Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, researcher-professor-practitioners, combined their individual research and together conducted new research for their book *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey*. Drawing on concepts from Sofia Cavalletti’s *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, they listened to and observed children’s understanding of and encounters with God. Their method was not didactic. The grownups in the room were

companions in the journey rather than teachers. “When we narrow our role to formal propositional teaching and external rewards to motivate learning, we often hinder faith formation,” they observe.¹ Instead, they presented children with raw materials and allowed them to paint their picture of God. They caution, however, that this is not free-range faith formation. “Although children have great potential for experiencing God, if that potential is not actively nurtured, awareness of God can become and remain dormant.”² They also concur with numerous other studies that have found that the direct influence of the church on children pales compared to the influence of the parents. Nurturing a child’s potential can and should be done in the context of the church, but it is much more impactful if it happens alongside parents and caregivers, as well as in the home.

Nevertheless, the church can do much to bring out each child’s potential. This begins with equipping parents and caregivers. Our church

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gives families framed blessings for their infants. We encourage the parents to choose one of these blessings to say daily. We have learned that the families that develop this habit with infants are far more likely to pray regularly with their children as they grow up, gifting the child with this foundational way of communicating with God. We have also given families prayer stations for their

homes and led workshops on celebrating Advent, Lent, and other holy days at home.

As a church, we can also model spiritual nurture. For example, when we treat a child’s comment in children’s time seriously rather than making it cute, we model respect for that child’s journey. We allow children to use their gifts to lead us. If a child has an encounter with God and wants to give testimony, we give them a platform to do that. When God places a concern on a child’s heart, we honor it. When a child rushes up to a pastor to tell them a dream they had about God, we get on their level and listen. We involve children in sermon preparation, listening to their

1 Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 39.

2 Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 43.

insights on the passage. We ask them to create art inspired by Scripture, or to paint God, and then we display that work in a gallery in the church. We name their encounters with God and give them language to name those encounters themselves. We honor their need to move by praying in yoga poses—and we learn that the rest of the church likes to do that too. We present the word of God as God’s big story, one in which children are invited to take their place. We present the church as God’s family and invite children to be instrumental members of it.

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a fourth of the population experiences God best through words.³ When we incorporate emotion-centered, action-centered, and symbol-centered ways to encounter God (something we often do

with children in mind), we all benefit. This involves a reimagining of congregational life, one that not only invites children in but that also allows all of us to experience God together.

Let’s circle back to the Ash Wednesday service. Caleb, now seven and battling neuroblastoma, still sometimes recites Psalm 51:10 as he washes his hands. During his chemo treatments, when cleanliness was life and death for him, his hand-washing ritual took on new meaning. This was a God-encounter for him and for his family. Because he experienced that service alongside his mother, his encounter from that night came home with him and could grow in the context of his home and even the hospital. He encountered God with his mother and with his church family. That is powerful.

Children are an indispensable part of the Body of Christ. When we respect them as spiritual beings, allow them into holy moments, and follow them into their sense of mystery, they can show us the way to God’s presence. Their encounters with God can transform us all.

About the author

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3 David Csinos, *Children’s Ministry That Fits: Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approaches to Nurturing Children’s Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 52–56.