

Transforming Practices

Emerging Literature on Children, Youth and Christian Formation

Karen Marie Yust, Union-PSCE

American church leaders and scholars have long taken an interest in the spiritual welfare of children and youth. Prior debates about infant baptism, articles and books on Christian nurture in the family, development of Sunday Schools for moral and religious education, emergence of youth-oriented religious organizations, and proliferation of religious goods marketed to Christian young people reveal a rich and, at times, controversial history of religious concern for forming young people in faith. Contemporary scholars are attempting to carry this tradition of concern into the twenty-first century, with the hope that sustained attention to the lives and spiritual journeys of children and youth in postmodern America will both stimulate and sustain young people's faith and strengthen the church through the active and creative participation of children and youth in faith communities. This article reviews the books and edited volumes of 24 such scholars or scholarly collaborations, highlighting shared themes and commitments in the major literature on children, youth and Christian formation that has emerged since 2000.

The Search Institute (Eugene Roehlkepartain and Peter Benson)

Perhaps the most far-reaching publications of this new century are the two edited volumes produced by the Search Institute, under the guidance of Eugene Roehlkepartain and Peter Benson (and with the assistance of five other editors and a multinational set of editorial advisors). *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (2006) brings together essays from 67 social scientists from around the globe in what is a both a broad survey and intriguing sample of contemporary research in the area of children and spirituality. Contributors frame their discussions in terms of psychoanalytic, stage, and developmental systems theories. The editors identify five contemporary assumptions about spirituality that also seem to shape current research. These include the beliefs that 1) spirituality is a "universal human process" and 2) a "complex, multidimensional phenomena;" 3) that attention to the "process" of spiritual change and transformation must temper the use of stage theories in describing and analyzing spirituality; 4) that context affects personal spiritual practices (and vice versa); and 5) that "spirituality is a life-shaping force" (8-11). Designed primarily for other social scientists and focusing typically on spirituality apart from religiosity, the volume nevertheless provides substantial material for practical theologians seeking to transform ministry practices

“Transforming Practices:
Emerging Literature on Children, Youth and Christian Formation”
by Karen Marie Yust
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

with Christian young people. Essays address the relationship between morality and spirituality, the effects of familial and non-familial adults on youth spirituality, the cultivation of resiliency and other character traits important for young people’s well-being, the interplay of ethnicity and culture in shaping spiritual experiences, and a host of other issues pertinent to Christian formation in a postmodern age.

The Search Institute’s second volume, *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World’s Religious Traditions* (2006), offers “insider” perspectives on the nature and challenges of spiritual formation primarily within the five major world religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism). Four editors and 42 authors explore their religious traditions’ understandings of the spiritual nature of children and teens, significant rites of passage, formative rituals and contemplative practices, modes of ethical decision-making and action, notions of individual and social responsibility for religious formation, and contemporary global issues threatening the well-being of children and youth. The importance of religious narratives as means by which children and youth are drawn into a life of faith and the practical significance of helping young people connect inner reflection with ethical action emerge as signature themes in the volume, as does the usefulness of strong ties between families and faith communities. Authors highlight specific practices (e.g. prayer, study of sacred scriptures, festival observance, performing ethical actions) that shape or mark young people as faithful participants, and readers will note significant overlap in these practices across religious traditions. An interesting aspect of this volume is its ability to identify for Christian leaders a wealth of shared concerns and approaches to nurturing the spiritual lives of children and adolescents within diverse religious traditions, which opens the door to interreligious dialogue about how best to approach the challenges that globalization and multiculturalism pose for formation in a particular religious tradition.

Christian Smith

A groundbreaking sociological study of adolescent spirituality, Christian Smith’s *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005) has challenged some widespread assumptions about adolescent faith and affirmed others. *Soul Searching* reports the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, which consisted of 3,370 telephone surveys with teens ages 13-17 and their parents and 267 interviews with a subset of the survey group. Smith and his research colleagues discovered that, contrary to popular thought, there is not much of a generation gap between adults and youth with regard to religious beliefs, identification with a tradition, and attendance at religious services (68). Teens identify both families and congregations as influential factors in their spiritual formation; however, religion is

not a common topic of conversation among adolescent peers (69-70). In general, American teens hold a religious view that Smith characterizes as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” which is composed of five basic beliefs:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die. (162-163)

Smith has produced a DVD, also titled *Soul Searching*, that can serve as a teaching tool for workshops with youth leaders. One might couple it with Sarah Feinbloom’s video documentary on adolescent spirituality, *What Do You Believe?* (2002), for an insightful look at the religious perspectives of contemporary American teenagers.

Carol Lytch

Carol Lytch’s study of high school seniors’ participation in congregational life is on a much smaller scale than Smith’s research and yet just as useful for understanding the religious beliefs and practices of a subset of Smith’s sample: Christian youth who regularly attend church. She observed three theologically diverse congregations (Catholic, evangelical, and mainline Protestant) in Louisville, Kentucky that are successfully attracting and holding older youth as participants. Following 10 months of qualitative research that included 83 formal interviews with teens and their guardians, Lytch reports in *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens* (2004) that “a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning, and opportunities to develop competence” are the three primary elements that draw adolescents to congregations (25). Furthermore, her analysis of teen participation suggests at least seven “religious styles” adopted by youth in their religious practice.

- A. “Conventionals” are strongly attached to home and church family, hold traditional gender and social values, are strongly grounded in their assurance of salvation, view marriage as a natural rite of

passage, and make moral decisions based on biblical law and their sense of what Jesus would do

- B. “Classics” value parental and peer relationships, are moderate in their social views, root their security in a sense of God’s call, desire parental blessing as they move into adulthood, and are guided morally by a sense of justice borne of the Golden Rule and Jesus’ example
- C. “Reclaimers” struggle with family relationships and identify with the marginalized, resist social stereotypes, believe fervently in God’s forgiveness and closeness, may feel thrust into adulthood prematurely, and measure morality in terms of resisting temptation and second chances
- D. “Marginalizers” strongly identify with a set of friends, tend to conform to the core group’s social style, believe success lies in personal abilities and luck, desire social recognition as a sign of maturation, and determine their moral obligations via an analysis of what is lost or gained (for self and others) through particular actions
- E. “Customizers” have a strong need for familial and peer intimacy, seek a personal style that is socially attractive, sense that God is found in close relationships and nature, prefer personalized rites of passage that acknowledge their commitments, and base morality on the avoidance of hypocrisy and an outpouring of compassion to those in need
- F. “Rejecters” seek out those who share their ideologies, conform their dress and attitude to reflect their values, ground themselves through habituation in their selected philosophy, measure maturity in terms of increased serenity or practical adherence to their beliefs, and situate moral action in the mantra, “think globally, act locally”
- G. “The Lost” have little experience with positive social relationships, adopt extreme dress codes and are social inept, exhibit insecurity via risky choices and incoherent values, see little distinction between adolescence and adulthood, and rely on common sense to make moral decisions that keep them from harm (136-137)

Lytch’s findings encourage church leaders to avoid simple divisions of youth into “churched” and “unchurched” categories and provide insights for developing ministries that address the wide variety of needs and perspectives presented by young people who participate in religious activities.

Wendy Haight

African-American Children at Church: A Sociocultural Perspective (2002) chronicles Wendy Haight’s four-year study of how one Baptist church in Utah contributes to the religious identity and social resiliency of black children aged three to 15. Haight notes that churches can function as contexts where children develop alternative belief systems that resist racial stereotyping and have opportunities to participate in a social organization without racist assumptions limiting their engagement (20-22). She describes the crucial role of storytelling in the spiritual formation of children and identifies three types of stories (biblical, personal and hypothetical) used by teachers to help children “find a personal meaning in the scriptures” (82). She also provides examples of several teaching strategies employed in church school classrooms, including “call-and-response sequences” (108), explicit statements about biblical-personal story connections (112), generalizing about story themes or concepts (113), figures of speech (114), role-play (116), “code switching” between standard and black English (120), and speaking in the historical present to render a story more immediate to children (122). Haight’s work offers an ethnographic snapshot that lends credence to the story-based educational theories of Anne Streaty Wimberly, Evelyn Parker, and other religious educators.

Lynn Schofield Clark

In *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (2003), Lynn Schofield Clark takes us out of the church school classroom and into the arena of young people’s fascination with “supernatural” characters, events, and powers. She interviewed a diverse group of 100 teens and 169 of their family and friends to discover how media’s portrayal of religion and the supernatural affects their own beliefs and spiritual identities. From these conversations she discerned five approaches adolescents take to such depictions:

- A. “Resisters” reject traditional organized religion and embrace the supernatural realm as more scientifically plausible or more representative of their experiences (77-81)

- B. “Mystical Teens” claim experiences with supernatural powers and try to interpret those events in light of religion ideas, although not in ways that necessarily cohere with traditional theology (112)
- C. “Experimenters” seek emotional connections and personal empowerment through both conventional religious and paranormal practices, which they see as interchangeable (133-135)
- D. “Traditionalists” are similar to the “Conventionals” described by Carol Lytch; they clearly distinguish between the beliefs and values of their religious traditions and depictions of religion and the supernatural in popular culture (155)
- E. “Intrigued Teens” attempt to uphold the distinctions made by their traditionalist peers while also accommodating depictions of the supernatural as other possible explanations of the world alongside conventional religious perspectives

Clark notes that even parents who label media depictions of the supernatural as “unrealistic” or “hokey” rarely reject the popular idea of a guardian angel or benevolent and inspirational forces out-of-hand (203). Thus, media images gain further credibility as plausible explanations for events in competition with traditional religious or even scientific claims. Religious leaders need to engage young people in thoughtful conversation about the supernatural and worldviews, says Clark, if congregations hope to remain influential in the lives of media-saturated teens (235).

Kenda Creasy Dean

While Kenda Creasy Dean’s book, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (2004), wasn’t written as a response to Clark’s study, it offers a practical theology of youth ministry well suited to address the fascination with the supernatural Clark analyzed. Dean taps into the passionate nature of adolescents and links their emotional and physical desire for life-changing relationships with Christ’s Passion. She calls on congregations to reclaim and model for youth the purpose of the Christian life: “to love in Christ’s name” with “a willingness to suffer alongside the beloved” (43). She argues that adolescents long for “steadfastness”, found in God’s fidelity and congregational practices of “being there” for youth; “ecstasy”, made possible by God’s transcendence and experienced via opportunities for “being moved”; and “intimacy”, rooted in communion with God and a Eucharistic identity as one who is “being known” among God’s people (71). She also points to a variety of spiritual practices

“Transforming Practices:
Emerging Literature on Children, Youth and Christian Formation”
by Karen Marie Yust
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

that can help direct youth longings toward “Divine Passion” and its human counterparts (e.g. spiritual friendship, commitments to justice, self-giving love) rather than unhealthy human passions (e.g. casual sex, addictions, bullying, self-effacement). Her goal is the formation of young disciples who are “subversive and prophets, forever marked by their identification with Jesus Christ and set apart by grace for lives of holy service” (254). Such youth might create a new category in Clark’s typology: “The Passionate”, who analyze and interpret media depictions of religion and the supernatural in terms of how they reflect the Passion of Christ and contribute to the vocation of Christ’s followers.

Dean is also one of three editors, with Chap Clark and Dave Rahn, of *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry* (2001). This textbook moves readers through four tasks inherent in practical theological reflection: describing the context in which contemporary youth are formed in faith, reflecting on seven distinct approaches to youth ministry as currently practiced, evaluating the theological convictions inherent in youth ministry practices, and developing more faithful strategies for adolescent spiritual transformation. Twenty-two youth ministry specialists contributed essays to the volume. Youth ministry models under reflection range from those that emphasize evangelism, partnering with parents, or Christian practices to those focused on developing leadership, critical consciousness, community teamwork, or innovative responses to an ever-changing popular culture. Four authors suggest four potential “starting points” for theological reflection on these and other models: repentance, grace, redemption, and hope (227). Eleven authors highlight possible strategies for viewing a youth ministry context more clearly, thinking outside the box of current practices, establishing appropriate boundaries and leading programs and events wisely, and developing honest assessment practices. Throughout the text, margin notes invite readers to interact with the concepts and claims of the authors through analysis of their own beliefs, experiences, hopes, and concerns. This marginalia, as much as any other aspect of the volume, models the kind of interactive and holistic engagement in theological reflection that the editors insist is essential for effective youth ministry.

Dave Rahn

Dave Rahn is also a co-editor (with Merton Strommen and Karen Jones) of a second youth ministry textbook, *Youth Ministry That Transforms: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Hopes, Frustrations, and Effectiveness of Today’s Youth Workers* (2001). Based on a sample of 2,130 youth ministers who attended a conference in Atlanta, this analytic survey sets out to identify needed changes in ministry with adolescents and suggest effective strategies for meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century. The authors focus first on six significant

“Transforming Practices:
Emerging Literature on Children, Youth and Christian Formation”
by Karen Marie Yust
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

concerns shared by youth ministers, such as struggles with time management (professional-personal and administrative-active engagement), inadequate compensation, minimal respect and support, youth apathy, and the disconnection of youth ministries from the center of congregational life (20). They then construct an approach to transformational youth ministry that relies on a clear articulation of mission, thorough volunteer training, shared congregational ownership, and careful attention to the spiritual formation of youth. They analyze their study sample to determine whether and how well this approach is being implemented by contemporary youth ministers. They also describe 10 individual and interpersonal aspects that affect professional satisfaction and note that size of youth group, seminary education, and congregational size influence (sometimes unrealistically) perceptions of professional achievement. The final chapter might serve as a starting point for developing youth ministry certification programs according to the authors’ approach; it describes eight educational needs that must be addressed for professional growth in the field.

Chap Clark

A scholar and prolific author working from an evangelical perspective, Chap Clark has published four books related to youth ministry since 2004. The first of those books, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (2004) explores the developmental challenges of mid-adolescence (ages 14-18) and what church leaders can do to assist high school youth and their parents in meeting these challenges. Clark believes that both society in general and the church in particular have systematically abandoned this age group. To gather data about adolescent identity and practices, he spent some weeks substitute teaching in a southern California secondary school, followed by over 100 informal and a few focus group conversations with teens about the findings that emerged from this ethnographic research. He concludes that youth today need nurturing communities, stability and security, and a variety of adults who will engage them in “authentic, intimate relationships” (171-176). With his wife, Dee Clark, he provides guidance for parents who undertake to meet these needs in *Disconnected: Parenting Teens in a MySpace® World* (2007), which links five tasks of parenting (i.e. “understanding”, “showing compassion”, “boundarying”, “charting/guiding”, and “launching into adulthood” [88]) to effective guidance of young people through childhood and adolescence. *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World: Not-So-Secret Findings about Youth Ministry* (2006) and *Deep Justice in a Broken World: Helping Your Kids Serve Others and Right the Wrongs around Them* (2008), both co-authored with Kara Powell, provide similar guidance for youth ministers. *Deep Ministry* follows the same practical theological reflection model of *Starting Right* to help church leaders evaluate current practices and discern new strategies for more effective ministry. *Deep Justice*

“Transforming Practices:
Emerging Literature on Children, Youth and Christian Formation”
by Karen Marie Yust
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

invites youth ministers to engage young people in critical reflection and prophetic action designed to transform the very world that has abandoned them and marginalized others through poverty and racism.

Children’s Ministries Textbook Collaborations

Like Dean, Rahn, and Clark, scholars studying children’s faith formation have recognized that new textbooks for children’s ministry leaders are necessary for effective professional development in the twenty-first century. *The Ministry of Children’s Education: Foundations, Contexts, and Practices* (2004) is the work of nine Lutheran seminary professors who want to lay a theological, social and developmental foundation for children’s ministry, explore the variety of contexts in which children are formed in faith, and address practical issues congregations face in their work with the church’s youngest members. Most intriguing in this collection are the essays by Mary Hess (on children and media culture), Nelson Strobert (on the effects of globalization on childhood), and Nathan Frambach (on the empowerment of children within congregations), as these topics particularly reflect the challenges of postmodern children’s ministries. The text also addresses more conventional ministry topics, such as partnership between church and family, teaching the Bible, experiential learning strategies, and program design and management.

Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community (2005) was developed by four scholars (Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell) seeking to reshape evangelical children’s ministries. Like the Lutheran collective, they begin with foundational issues, supplementing their theological and developmental material with attention to the history of children’s ministries and a lengthier discussion of children in the Bible. They explore the implications of cultural, familial, and congregational contexts for effective faith formation and identify a variety of stories – most prominently, the biblical story – as important content for ministry with children. They tackle the complex topic of curriculum, offering both theoretical and practical perspectives on the identification of curricular aims, selection of resources, and creation of learning environments. They give similar attention to the topics of worship, teaching and learning, specialized ministries (e.g. tutoring programs, Bible clubs, community fairs), children at risk or with special needs, and ministry teams.

David Jensen

Like youth ministry scholars, scholars interested in children’s spirituality have also developed practical theologies of childhood as frameworks for reconceiving faith formation

“Transforming Practices:
Emerging Literature on Children, Youth and Christian Formation”
by Karen Marie Yust
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

practices. David Jensen’s offering is *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (2005). As the title suggests, he orients his discussion around the concept of “vulnerability”: children’s susceptibility to romanticization, demonization, marginalization and violence; God’s vulnerability in the Incarnation; and desirable ecclesial practices that can both symbolize and address vulnerability. Traditional Reformed theology, via references to Calvin, Barth, and Schleiermacher, informs his perspective but is not his only source of inspiration. A veritable cloud of theological witnesses (including Catholic theologian Karl Rahner) share space with data from cultural studies and even references to children’s literature. Jensen encourages scholars and children’s ministry leaders to think carefully about what it means to accept Jesus’ invitation to become like a child and to understand and work with children from a place of commitment to vulnerability sanctified by God’s grace.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore

Exploring how children have been viewed by society and the church is the focus of Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (2003). Her questions arise from her personal experiences of parenting three boys alongside her research and teaching as a pastoral theologian. Concerned about the ways in which psychology and theology have cast children as victims or sinners in need of conversion, she draws from Christianity and modern feminism more constructive concepts (e.g. children as gifts from God, as possessors of agency, and as beloved work) with which to shape adult-child relationships. She characterizes child care as a religious discipline incumbent on parents, congregations, and society. Her goal is to provide a different set of “operating instructions” for faithful parenting and congregational ministries (). In *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice* (2007), she does just that, addressing common parenting dilemmas such as balancing personal time with parental responsibilities and encouraging families to notice God in the ordinary activities of their lives.

Joyce Mercer

Joyce Mercer also roots *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (2005) in an explicitly feminist perspective. Her entry points into theological reflection are stories from the lives of children, some of whom are actual people and others who imaginatively represent cultural groups of children. She frames her theology with the Gospel of Mark because of the prominent way in which children in that gospel “mirror the journey of Jesus” (44). A major focus of her discussion is the way in which global capitalism casts children into problematic roles as economic producers (in sweatshops run by multinational companies in the Two-Thirds

World) and consumers (in American families). Like Jensen, she also probes the ways in which religious discourse casts children as both innocent vessels of God’s grace and demonic creatures in need of corporal punishment and redemption (119) and she, too, turns to Barth and Rahner for theological inspiration. She devotes an entire chapter to the importance of including children fully in congregational worship, arguing that how adults welcome children in worship models (or not) a more just society, one she dares church leaders to dream about in the conclusion of the book.

Mercer has also written two books linked to the faith formation of adolescents. *Girl Talk/God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls – and Their Parents* (2008) focuses on the stories adolescent girls tell to express their realities and worldviews. Drawing from 50 interviews to create portraits of the religious lives of the young women who participated in the Youth Theology Institute (YTI) at Emory University, Mercer invites readers to hear what these adolescents have to say about faith, parents, and growing up female in the twenty-first century. *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests*, co-authored with Dori Baker, uses additional YTI research material and other data to explore the challenging process of being supportive companions as youth discern their vocational callings. Mercer and Baker advocate immersion in nature (49), “holy listening to inchoate testimony” (73) and theological reflection on stories presented in film (103) as contexts and methods for such companionship. Separate chapters explore gendered concerns related to vocation. With their concluding emphasis on the important role of religious communities in nurturing and affirming individual callings, they remind church leaders that the Christian formation of youth is a community event even as it is an intimate conversation between God and each of God’s beloved children.

Dori Baker

Baker is also the author of *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women* (2005). She introduces the social concept of “female clusters” (2), groups of adolescent girls who meet with adult mentors to tell their stories, process the emotions evoked by these telling, and discern how this process might engender change for themselves and the world. Baker is concerned about the ways in which traditional forms of theological reflection and assumptions about gender roles and God’s image can silence the voices of young women. Her method invites teens to mine their lives and the resources of their religious traditions for material that can inspire “health resistance” to an oppressive culture (79). She advocates an “embodied pedagogy” that takes into account physical and emotional comfort (154-156) and claims that doing girlfriend theology is an act of “meeting at the crossroads of souls” (171). Her book spurs reflection on the practical as well as theoretical dynamics of feminist youth ministry.

Evelyn Parker

Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents (2003) is Evelyn Parker's study of 20 black teenagers in the metro Chicago area fashioning spiritual lives amid racism and urban violence. She argues that “African American adolescent spirituality as *emancipatory hope* fosters an intricately woven life of Christian hope, holiness, and social activism against injustice” (viii). Like Mercer, she begins with stories, which she analyzes and then mines to construct a womanist theological framework for youth formation. She describes young people's struggles to achieve a positive sense of racial identity in the face of racism, explores the dynamics of female gangs and male racial profiling, and attends to the anger many black adolescents feel in response to discrimination. She urges congregations to teach youth the value of “oppositional imagination” (48) and “holy indignation” (141), to help black teens resist racial shame (75) and the stigma of profiling (122), and to provide youth ministry leadership that embodies hope and promotes human flourishing (150-151).

Parker is also the editor of *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class and Gender* (2006) and co-editor (with Anne Wimberly) of *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (2003). *Sacred Selves* explores issues of race, class, and gender in a series of essays focused on the stories of particular adolescent social cohorts (e.g. African American, lesbian, working class), which continues Parker's emphasis on narrative theological reflection. She suggests dancing as a metaphor for female adolescent spirituality across these categories, observing that “dancing signifies a spirituality that offers a liberative hope to adolescent girls...” (163). She contributes the essay on adolescent faith formation to *In Search of Wisdom*, tying her concern for emancipatory hope to black youth hip-hop culture and the overarching theme of wisdom cultivation in this life-spanning text.

Robert Dykstra, Allan Cole and Donald Capps

Aware of an emerging literature on the spirituality of adolescent girls, three pastoral theologians decided to explore the particular spiritual concerns of young men. The result is *Losers, Loners, and Rebels: The Spiritual Struggles of Boys* (2007) by Robert Dykstra, Allan Cole, and Donald Capps. The authors focus on early adolescence (the middle school/junior high years) and weave reflections from their own boyhood with professional insights from developmental theory and theological analysis. They claim that “the spirituality of early adolescent boys is more likely to issue from experiences the boy considers negative than from experiences he considers positive” (10), experiences such as loneliness, losing, and rebellion. They posit that these negative experiences shape the young teen's struggles for self-

“Transforming Practices:
Emerging Literature on Children, Youth and Christian Formation”
by Karen Marie Yust
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

transcendence, self-awareness, and self-sufficiency and propose a set of spiritual perspectives and practices that can assist in these struggles. Cole identifies solitude with God as a potential antidote to the suffering of existential loneliness. Dykstra draws from the story of the young Jesus teaching in his “father’s house” to suggest different ways of construing the power of success and failure. Capps explores ways in which humor acknowledges vulnerability and functions as a means of resistance. Given the paucity of resources on male spirituality in general and male adolescent spirituality in particular, *Losers, Loners, and Rebels* is an important text for scholars and church leaders trying to understand how gender shapes the worldviews and faith of boys in American culture.

Karen Marie Yust

Redefining how spirituality is understood in relation to a particular age group is also the goal of Karen Marie Yust’s *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives* (2004). Yust argues that traditional concepts of “faith” need to be reconceived in ways that acknowledge and affirm the spirituality of children 12 and younger. By focusing on the capabilities of children at any given age rather than their shortcomings as non-adults, she constructs a theology of children’s faith formation rooted in the complex realities of children’s lives rather than romantic stereotypes of childhood innocence or cultural dismissals of children’s agency. She draws on acculturation theory to explain the bicultural identity of children who participate in both secularized and religious environments. Like several other scholars, she emphasizes the value of stories for faith formation and also urges adults to cultivate with children a set of spiritual practices that develop “spiritual bilingualism”, a quieting of the self in the presence of God, wondering about religious matters, and opportunities for compassionate and justice-oriented service. Written as a form of outreach to families drawn to spirituality but not necessarily connected with a particular faith tradition or community, the book also provides guidance for church leaders who value partnership with parents as adults and children live into God’s realm together.

Bradley Wigger

Bradley Wigger speaks directly to Christian parents in *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love & Grace* (2003). Using stories about his own children, he demonstrates the power of family-based learning experiences to shape childhood faith. He links his personal observations with biblical interpretation, revealing the timeless nature of human struggles with loving one another, finding hope, grieving mistakes and losses, and remaining in relationship with God. He urges parents to cultivate in themselves and their children a kind of

faith marked by “double vision,” where meaning-making requires paying attention to the “concrete and symbolic, specific and general, visible and invisible, particular and universal, part and whole” (126). He highlights the practices of prayer, reading scripture, sharing meals, service, celebrating religious holidays, and talking about God as ordinary ways families can learn more about faith and faithfulness. He has also published *Together We Pray: A Prayer Book for Families* (2005) as a resource for family spirituality. Diana Garland’s *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families: Living the Faith in Daily Life* (2003) and Wendy Wright’s *Seasons of a Family’s Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home* (2003) offer similar perspectives and are part of a series on faith and families that Wigger and Garland edit for Jossey-Bass.

Elizabeth Caldwell

The importance of family in child and adolescent faith formation is also the focus of Elizabeth Caldwell’s companion books, *Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children* (2000, rev. ed. 2007) and *Leaving Home with Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of our Youth* (2002). Her texts are succinct and jammed with quick and accurate summaries of theories, theologies, and ministry models. *Making a Home for Faith* encourages parents to create a “faithful ecology” (73) that includes family rituals, Bible stories, prayers, Sabbath time, and participation in the seasons of the liturgical year. Caldwell also describes four types of faith questions (informational, analytical, experiential, and mystical [61-62]) typically asked by children and offers a crash course in basic theology to help parents respond to their children’s queries. *Leaving Home with Faith* devotes a chapter to defining the purposes of confirmation, developing an effective model of confirmation education, and celebrating the faith decisions young people make during the process. Caldwell also describes a “backpack of belonging” filled with memories of family time, religious practices, stories, talents, and other spiritually useful items that parents should help adolescents pack prior to launching them into the adult world (48).

Mark Yaconelli

A major concern of most of the authors on this list has been reclaiming classical Christian practices for twenty-first century ministries with children and youth. As director of the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project, Mark Yaconelli discovered the deep value of inner contemplation for church leaders more typically caught up in outward forms of spiritual service and fellowship. *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus* (2006) attempts to facilitate the faith formation of youth by emphasizing the connection between the spiritual lives of youth ministers and those they serve. If youth leaders have lost touch with the living

“Transforming Practices:
Emerging Literature on Children, Youth and Christian Formation”
by Karen Marie Yust
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

presence of God in their lives or are inattentive to the ways in which God is truly active in the everyday lives of adolescents, then youth ministry is ineffectual. Yaconelli reminds the church “that what youth need most are people who know how to be present to God and present to one another” (24). That type of presence is rarely cultivated in a fast-paced, highly competitive culture too busy moving from one place to another to stop and pay attention to God’s work in the world. Yaconelli mixes stories from his personal and professional experience with biblical reflections and questions that invite readers to assess their own spiritual lives and consider what practices might help them participate more fully in Godly contemplation, personally and in their ministry with youth. His edited volume, *Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry* (2007), provides further insight into this approach via essays written by several persons involved in the seven-year Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project.

Dorothy Bass and Don Richter

Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens (2002) was one of the first books to advocate a focus on spiritual practices in youth ministry, and in that sense it might be considered a harbinger of Yaconelli’s contemplative approach. Indeed, Yaconelli was one of the contributors to this volume edited by Dorothy Bass and Don Richter, which paired adults and youth as authors of essays about 18 different practices significant for youth faith formation. The authors tackle issues such as faithful use of time, making good choices, and being good stewards of “stuff” (Yaconelli’s concern); explore basic adolescent concerns like friendship, forgiveness, grief, and trustworthiness; and provide a snapshot of how scripture reading, prayer, music, work, and play actually figure into the lives of contemporary Christian teenagers. Bass and her twins, John and Martha Schwehn, open the book with reflections on “dancing to the beat of God’s heart” (8) through practices and close with the reminder that “having a community is important” (295) to maintaining one’s stamina in the dance with God. A companion curriculum is available online at www.waytolive.org for youth ministers who want to use the book as a starting point for group theological reflection and action. An unrelated but similar volume, *Soul Tending: Life-Forming Practices for Older Youth and Young Adults* (2002), provides additional curricular suggestions for leaders who want to follow a “practices” approach to youth ministry.

Fred Edie

Fred Edie highlights the particular power of worship practices to shape adolescent spirituality and youth ministry in *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry* (2007). The crux of his argument is that “youth formed through the *ordo* may come to imagine and interpret their lives in light of the manifold ways holy things

‘speak’ Jesus Christ for them and for the world” (186). Drawing examples from his experiences with the Duke Youth Academy, he demonstrates how worship practice helps young people experience God’s presence, learn more about the nature of God, and discern their vocational callings (12). Edie advocates regular, frequent and active youth participation in the Eucharistic celebration, combined with intentional teaching about the sacrament of communion and facilitated reflection on their experiences. He emphasizes the “storied” character of the Bible (108) and suggests that youth ministers combine the use of narrative pedagogies with liturgical story-telling and opportunities for youth to faithfully perform the biblical story in the worshipping community. He provides a model of theological reflection focused on baptism that encourages critical and constructive engagement with scripture, culture, and personal beliefs and practices. His discussion of time focuses on the connections between timekeeping, religious imagination, and meaning making, with specific attention given to Sabbath keeping and daily prayer. He makes a passionate plea for the revaluing of artistic ways of knowing in youth ministry, citing creative story-telling, poetic language, and metaphorical speech as essential to understanding who God is and what God is doing in the practice of worship.

David White

David White selects the practice of discernment rather than worship as the central focus of his youth ministry model. *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach* (2005) draws from White’s work with two youth theology programs and his deep commitment to contextual theological reflection. He identifies five issues that impede effective youth ministry: cultural myths about what constitutes success; ecclesial marginalization; material detachment from society; resistance to theological reflection; and discontinuous, disaffected, or alienated leadership. He then suggests that emphasizing discernment can address these contemporary spiritual roadblocks. He provides theological rationales for the four movements of the practice – “listening, understanding, remembering/dreaming, and acting” (9) – and provides practical suggestions for implementing each one. Each movement is tied to a mode of loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, so that together they comprise a full relationship with God in the sense of the biblical mandate. Like Edie and others, White recognizes the power of the Christian story to challenge unhealthy and unfaithful cultural messages about who youth are and how God wants them to act in the world.

Katherine Turpin

Resisting the false messages of consumer culture is the particular focus of Katherine Turpin’s youth ministry model, described in *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (2006). Turpin argues that consumerism functions as a “golden calf” (29) for adolescents, setting up material goods as objects of devotion and undermining young people’s vocational imagination. Furthermore, she believes that youth must be liberated from the oppressiveness of consumerism through practices designed to cultivate critical awareness and communal action (55). She frames her discussion within the work of Paulo Freire and Wesleyan theological language of conversion, sketching a process that includes movements of “awakening”, “repentance”, “justification”, and “regeneration” (76-78). Her work provides a way for church leaders to minister with youth in ways that reshape adolescent imagination, reengage genuine social agency, and realign young people’s lives with the transformative message of the gospel. Key to her approach is the development of small groups that function as a kind of Christian “underground” movement for supporting youth resistance of the dehumanizing aspects of consumer culture (179). These groups are also “circles of grace” in the lifelong process of conversion (194).

A Concluding Observation

A thread that stitches together this crazy quilt of resources related to children, youth, and Christian formation is the authors’ shared concern to transform the practices of children’s and youth ministry through transforming our theoretical and theological thinking about children, youth, and formation. These texts recognize that the twenty-first century requires church leaders to address perennial faith problems – idolatry, divine anthropomorphism, temptation, sacrifice, faith-fullness – in the context of the real lives of young people today. Furthermore, these authors turn to a host of renewed and renewing classical Christian practices as means for reshaping our approaches to ministry with children and youth. They understand faith formation as a communal activity characterized by communal practices. Children and youth do not simply read stories of faith for themselves, but participate in the story-telling practices of a worshipping congregation. Practicing passion requires others with whom to experience the truth of God’s life-giving relationship with the world. Church leaders thrive in children’s and youth ministries that are integrated rather than disconnected from the life of the broader community. Families practicing faith together best nurture the spiritual lives of young people. When we listen to this emerging literature, we hear a chorus of voices calling for transforming practices of ministry that draw children and youth into communities practicing a

faith with transformative potential. As this refrain swells in the Church, children and youth have more opportunities to be full participants in the life of faith and God’s transformational activity in the world.

Bibliography

- Baker, D. (2005). *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Baker, D. and Mercer, J. (2007). *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Bass, D. and Richter, D., eds. (2002). *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*. Nashville: Upper Room Books.
- Broyles, A., et al. (2002) *Soul Tending: Life-Forming Practices for Older Youth and Young Adults*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Caldwell, E. (2002). *Leaving Home with Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of our Youth*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- _____ (2000, rev. ed. 2007). *Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Clark, C. (2004). *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- _____ and Clark, D. (2007). *Disconnected: Parenting Teens in a MySpace® World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- _____ and Powell, K. (2006). *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World: Not-So-Secret Findings about Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialities.
- _____ (2008). *Deep Justice in a Broken World: Helping Your Kids Serve Others and Right the Wrongs around Them*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialities.
- Clark, L. (2003). *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dean, K. (2004). *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- _____, Clark, C. and Rahn, D., eds. (2001). *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialities.

- Dykstra, R., Cole, A. and Capps, D. (2007). *Lowers, Loners, and Rebels: The Spiritual Struggles of Boys*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Edie, F. (2007). *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Feinbloom, S. (2002 Video). *What Do You Believe? The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. San Francisco: Lieberman Productions.
- Garland, D. (2003). *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families: Living the Faith in Daily Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Haight, W. (2002). *African-American Children at Church: A Sociocultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jensen, D. (2005). *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Krych, M., ed. (2004). *The Ministry of Children's Education: Foundations, Contexts, and Practices*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Lytch, C. (2004). *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- May, S., Posterski, B., Stonehouse, C. and Cannell, L. (2005). *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Mercer, J. (2008). *Girl Talk/God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls – and Their Parents*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- _____ (2005). *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
- Miller-McLemore, B. (2007). *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- _____ (2003). *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Parker, E., ed. (2006). *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class and Gender*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- _____ (2003). *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Roehlkepartain, E., King, P., Wagener, L. and Benson, P., eds. (2006). *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Smith, C. (2005). *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____, Eaton, M. and Eaton, T. (2007 DVD). *Soul Searching: A Movie about Teenagers and God*. New Windsor, NY: Revelation Studios.
- Strommen, M., Jones, K. and Rahn, D. (2001). *Youth Ministry That Transforms: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Hopes, Frustrations, and Effectiveness of Today's Youth Workers*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialties.
- Turpin, K. (2006). *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- White, D. (2005). *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Wigger, B. (2003). *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love & Grace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- _____. (2005). *Together We Pray: A Prayer Book for Families*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
- Wimberly, A. and Parker, E., eds. (2002). *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Wright, W. (2003). *Seasons of a Family's Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Yaconelli, M. (2006). *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialties.
- _____. (2007). *Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialties.
- Yust, K. (2004). *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- _____, Johnson, A., Sasso, S. and Roehlkepartain, E., eds. (2006). *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Perspectives*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.