



Saturated Spirituality: Creating Environments that Nurture All Children

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Have you ever been so moved by a piece of music that you shed a tear or can't help but clap along? Are you passionate about making a difference or, as Gandhi said, being "the change you wish to see in the world?" Are you the sort of person who likes to go on long hikes and just spend time among nature? Do you love to learn and do you continually soak up information about the world around you?

Whatever type of person you are, it cannot be denied that you are a spiritual being who is capable of engaging in transcendence, of moving beyond the here-and-now, and connecting with God. Just as the questions I posed imply different ways of viewing the world and expressing yourself, there are also many ways to be spiritual. Yet amidst this diversity, four ways of expressing one's spirituality—four *spiritual styles*—emerge as legitimate and formational avenues for knowing God.

In this article, we will take a journey through what my colleagues and I have come to call spiritual styles. Spiritual styles are four distinct ways in which people encounter God and express their ultimate concerns. After a brief introduction to the concept of spiritual styles, I will describe some of the significant characteristics of each style. Drawing from the results of a six-month qualitative research project, I will move toward a discussion about how pastors, teachers, and leaders of children can create environments and ministries that nurture the spirituality and faith of children from each spiritual style. Our first task, however, is to explore what exactly I mean when I speak of spiritual styles.

Spiritual styles describe key ways in which human beings encounter God and express their inherent spirituality, faith, and ultimate concerns. More broadly, they speak of four manners in which people make meaning of themselves, the world around them, and their relationships with other individuals. Each of the four spiritual styles illustrates key aspects of our faith and our quests to transcend the here-and-now, connect with God, and understand our surroundings. They have the power to affect our very core and they act as lenses through which we see and make meaning of the world around us. My colleagues and I label the four spiritual styles **word**, **emotion**, **symbol**, and **action**.

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Four Spiritual Styles

Each one of these styles speaks of general ways of experiencing God and expressing our spiritual lives through distinct yet fluid boundaries. Many people possess one dominant spiritual style, yet might be influenced by the other three in significant ways as well. And this is a good thing! A healthy spirituality should consist of a balanced tension between all four styles. When such a balance is not present in a person's faith life, there is a dangerous tendency to fall into an extreme form of one style.

Furthermore, a person's dominant spiritual style can change over time. Someone who expressed a word-centered approach today might become focused on emotions, symbols, or action later in life. While our dominant spiritual styles affect the way we see and interact with the world around us, our environment can in turn affect which of these four styles come to dominate the landscape of our inner lives.

I can certainly attest to the ways in which one's dominant spiritual style can change over time. As I look back on my life, I am able to highlight key times in which words characterized my spirituality and faith, times during which I focused on emotions, other moments that were based on symbols, and still other times that action was what seemed to matter most. And during many of these times, the faith communities and spiritual environments in which I found myself certainly had an impact on which spiritual styles I used to express myself, understand the world, and connect with God.

Joyce Bellous, a retired professor at McMaster Divinity College, Denise Peltomaki, a former children's pastor, and I worked together to design two self-assessment tools—one for adults and one for children—that measure the degree to which each spiritual style affects a person's life. Each assessment is made up of questions that assist people in identifying their dominant spiritual styles and understanding the styles that might not be so important to them. These assessments, available from Tall Pine Press (www.tallpinepress.com), ask a number of questions about common and sometimes overlooked assumptions focusing on topics such as prayer, relationships, money, learning, and communication. Based on one's selection of multiple choice responses, the tools measure the presence of the four spiritual styles in one's life. Many people

who have used these tools to assess themselves have found them to be incredibly helpful in understanding how they make sense of the world, how they engage in relationships with other people, and how they understand ministry and faith formation.

What does all this talk of spiritual styles have to do with children's faith formation? Through qualitative research and children's self-assessment, I have found that children readily use spiritual styles in their everyday lives. They encounter God, see the world, and experience the spiritual environments of their faith communities through words, emotions, symbols, and action.

This is an important point for children's ministers, leaders, teachers, and parents to keep in mind. Without an understanding of these four ways of knowing God, we might presume that our dominant style is the "correct" or "best" approach to spirituality and then form our ministries so that children experience faith formation according to our dominant style. This can leave some young people feeling as though something is wrong with them or that they are not welcome or included in their congregations. While pastors, teachers, and leaders certainly do not intend for these results, the feeling that they do not fit in their congregations can cut children off from having genuine encounters with God and engaging in life-changing faith formation.

It becomes imperative that those working with children—and parents who seek to nurture their children's faith—gain an understanding of the four spiritual styles, come to see what styles might dominate their spiritual lives, and nurture the faith formation of children in environments characterized by a balanced tension between all four styles. When these things happen, children will not only feel a sense of fit; they will also come to see that there are indeed many legitimate and formative ways in which people experience God and express their faith.

A Word-Centered Approach

A word-centered approach to spirituality upholds the importance of words in making sense of the world and experiencing God. People of this style focus on having the correct words in correct relationship with one another, as well as having words in the correct relationship with those things to which they refer.

People with a word-centered spirituality see faith formation and growth occurring through

increases in knowledge, understanding, and reflection on spiritual issues, often through the study of sacred texts. People of this style *know* God when they *know about* God. Thus, the accuracy of words matters because it demonstrates a well-grounded faith and conveys important propositional knowledge that can help others be formed in faith.

Spoken *and* written words are vital to people who express their inner lives through this style. The spoken word enables people to instruct, preach, and proclaim important information and interpretations that enable faith formation to occur. Written words act as sources of knowledge to be absorbed and interpreted. Scripture becomes highly valued as the Word above all words. God's instructions to Ezekiel (3:1) can be a mantra for this style. It calls people to "eat this book," to ingest scripture in order to grow in wisdom and knowledge and thus grow in faith. Additionally, people of this style tend to think of God in concrete ways, as revealed and able to be known.

A word-centered approach to spirituality tends to produce people who are engaged in scholarship and theological interpretation in order to delve into the content of faith and aid others in understanding theology and doctrine. Many great theologians throughout history—from Thomas Aquinas to Karl Barth—can be understood through this style. These individuals, like many word-centered people today, value the power of rational arguments to persuade others into adopting accurate interpretations of the faith. Conceptual clarity comes to be seen as the goal of spiritual development and faith formation.

An example of a contemporary tradition that appears to be focused on this style is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a denomination that highly values having knowledge of proper doctrine and correctly interpreting scripture and theological texts. As candidates for ordination within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) go through the process leading toward ordination, they must take a number of rigorous examinations that test their knowledge in areas like Bible, theology, and polity. In the denomination's own words, "The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) considers basic knowledge of the content of the Bible to be an essential prerequisite for ministry. The Bible Content examination is intended to assess one's knowledge of stories, themes and pertinent passages in the Old and New Testaments." Clearly, this tradition values words and the knowledge that they can impart into the spiritual lives of human beings.

An Emotion-Centered Approach

A spirituality that is centered on emotions places one's feeling at the core of the spiritual life. The life of faith is nurtured through having and expressing deep feelings and emotions, which are seen as potent ways of connecting with God. While word-centered people might treat their emotions with suspicion, people of this style see their feelings as inherently good. Focusing on emotions is not a lazy substitute for rigorous academic work; it involves the hard work of getting in touch with one's inner self.

The arts are vital to the spirituality and faith of people with an emotion-centered approach to spirituality. Music, dance, and drama are especially important for their power to evoke the human emotions and connect one's affective nature with the transcendent. People of this style often place a priority on musical worship and encourage people to be free to express their emotions while making or listening to music.

While embodied expression and feelings are highly valued, oral witness or testimony is seen as an important way of expressing emotions as well as tapping into and capturing the feelings of others. Giving testimony to the power of God in one's own life can easily become an emotional experience, involving laughter and tears, deep sorrow and immense joy. Conversion experiences are often hallmarks of giving testimony and involve sensing that God is connecting with a person in order to change them from the inside-out. Oral witness is also understood as a way of persuading others through flashes of insight received from God rather than rational, intellectual arguments.

Relationships matter for their power to give people feelings of joy, fulfillment, and security. While the rationalism and intellectualism of word-centered spirituality might be suspect by people of this style, both styles share a focus on concrete expressions of God. For those with an emotion-centered approach to spirituality, God is here-and-now and can be reached and felt through emotionally-charged experiences. Jesus Christ is often conceived in relational terms, perhaps as the lover of one's soul or a nurturing and kind parent. The transformational goal of emotion-centered spirituality is the personal renewal of one's innermost self.

Pentecostal and charismatic traditions are vivid examples of this spiritual style. They demonstrate a

clear focus on emotions through their intense musical worship and personal testimony, as well as the freedom they give to divine expression through acts such as speaking in tongues and raising one's arms to God. Some of the core values of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada are "Pentecostal worship, every-member ministry, loving relationships, Holy Spirit-empowered evangelism, anointed proclamation and practical expression of Christian faith."² Terms such as "Holy Spirit-empowered," "anointed," and "practical expression" speak of this denomination's high esteem of connecting to God through the emotions.

A Symbol-Centered Approach

While both previous spiritual styles value concrete images of God, a symbol-centered spirituality moves from the concrete to the abstract through a focus on symbols, metaphors, and images. This is a mystical approach to spirituality and faith that views God as infinite mystery. As such, God is more sensed than spoken. People of this style hold that God transcends words as well as finite human understanding. In the words of popular author Rob Bell, "The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It is about things and beings that ultimately can't be put into words. Language fails. And if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not" (Bell, 32).

While God can not be completely understood, God can be sensed through symbols and rituals that capture and reflect God's transcendent nature. This way of sensing the presence of God is distinct from feeling God through an emotion-centered approach. It is a deep awareness of God that cannot be explained. After all, if it can be explained through words, these people might hold that it was not a true God-experience.

Artwork and the imagination are central to this approach to spirituality and faith. After all, we who are made in God's image have been given imaginations that can be used to connect with God and nourish our inner lives. Beauty, whether natural or made by human hands, is prized by people of this style for its ability to express God's infinite creativity and being. The great symbols and artwork that have been created throughout the history of the Christian church have the transcendent ability to tap into our inner selves and allow us to sense the presence of God. Many symbol-centered people might sense God simply by walking into a beautiful space, such

as St. Joseph's Oratory in Montréal, the Spanish Synagogue in Prague, or Hagia Sophia, the 1500-year-old basilica and mosque that was converted into a breath-taking museum in Istanbul. For others, the serene calmness of a river or meadow is enough to evoke a spirit-to-Spirit connection.

Since talk about God, faith, and the spiritual life is limited, symbol-centered people value silence, stillness, and solitude as a means of knowing God and experiencing transcendence beyond the here-and-now. Through silence, God can be heard and sensed deep within one's inner self, even though such experiences are unable to be expressed to others in words. Through stillness, people can wait for God's presence to surround them. Through solitude, they can retreat from the world in order to refresh their inner lives.

People who have a symbol-centered approach to spirituality value spiritual practices, such as listening or centering prayer, *lectio divina*, silent retreats, and meditating on icons. Practices such as these can help them attain the goal of faith formation: union with the transcendent, ineffable God.

There are many historic examples of traditions and individuals who portray a symbol-centered approach to spirituality, including the great English mystic and anchoress, Julian of Norwich, and the desert fathers who lived as monks, hermits, and ascetics. Contemporary examples include the Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches, and some emerging churches. These groups draw from traditional ways in which the church has mystically connected with God. Rites and rituals such as the Eucharist, the creation of beautiful spaces that speak of God's divine presence, and liturgies that are rich in symbolism are used in order to unite with a God that transcends ordinary time and space.

An Action-Centered Approach

The final spiritual style is centered on action. It is an approach to faith that focuses on what is being done in the world. Rather than what one thinks, feels, or senses, people of this style focus on what one does to evoke positive changes in the world. These people are activists who roll up their sleeves and get to work. The Lord's Prayer, which includes a request that "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," might be an appropriate motto or mantra for this style.

Prayer, for these people, is more lived than spoken. These people encounter God and nurture

their spiritual lives when they are actively working to transform the world. This is an approach to spirituality that follows the tradition of the prophets, who spoke and acted in order to bring about God's will and justice on earth and to provoke others to change their oppressive ways.

Yet, like many of the biblical prophets, action-centered people can be misunderstood and seen as single-minded or impatient. Their zealous passion can evoke negative responses from others, especially because they often act without taking time to explain the reasons for their actions. After all, for these people, words matter far less than action. Thus, they can often become isolated by faith communities, who might see them as eccentric, troublesome, and demeaning. On the other hand, action-centered individuals sometimes believe that those who are unwilling to help them are too blind to see what must be done or too cowardly to fight the system and change the world.

Nevertheless, motivated by a deep union with the needs of the world, these people often press on in their unswerving missions in order to bring about peace, justice, and wholeness even if they must do so alone. Clearly, the transformational goal for action-centered people is bringing about change and working to upset the destructive and harmful conditions in the world that God so loves.

Contemporary examples include Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Desmond Tutu, as well as some leaders within the emerging and missional church movements, including Brian McLaren and Shane Claiborne. Ron Sider, Founder and President of Evangelicals for Social Action, knows that value of getting things done in the world. In his bestselling book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, he writes, "regardless of what we do or say at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, rich Christians who neglect the poor are not the people of God" (Sider, 60). He is affirming that what matters more than informative sermons and emotional worship is how we live and act in the world around us.

Taking Spiritual Styles to the Extreme

While each of these four spiritual styles are formative and have the power to authentically connect people with God, each style can be taken to

the extreme. When they are not balanced by each other, rich and genuine ways of expressing one's inner life can become harmful aberrations of spirituality and faith.

For example, a word-centered approach, when taken to the extreme, simply becomes a faith characterized by cold, hard ideas and cannot sustain people during times of suffering and crisis. An action-centered spirituality that is not balanced by words, emotions, and symbols can become work devoid of empathy, love, and joy, and it can alienate people for "talking the talk" and failing to grasp visions while not taking the time to explain one's transformational goals.

A healthy spirituality is one that possesses a degree of balance between these four spiritual styles. Surely, most people will find themselves leaning in one or two specific directions and relying on a particular way of knowing God and making meaning of the world. Few people will possess a fairly equal balance of all four styles. But this does not mean that we can ignore the ways in which other people make sense, express their ultimate concerns, and connect with God. And let us remember that these styles are not hard-and-fast in the organic and evolving lives of human beings. People's styles can adapt and change over time.

It is important to continually engage in some soul searching to ensure that one is not drifting too far from a balanced tension between all four styles and developing a single-style approach to spirituality. When it comes to children's ministry, pastors, leaders, and teachers can create environments that help to nurture the faith and spirituality of all young people by including elements that speak to children that possess each spiritual style. In such an environment, children can encounter God through words, emotions, symbols, and action and no child will be left behind.

Creating Inclusive Environments

Ideally, congregations are places where people are welcomed, supported, encouraged, and challenged. They are places in which people ought to feel included in the life and practices of the community, where they sense a satisfactory degree of fit. So it is with children's ministries. All children ought to be welcomed, affirmed, and appropriately challenged

toward growth as they experience and engage in children's ministries and in the wider life of the congregation. Without this feeling of fit, their spiritual growth and formation in faith can be at risk.

Sadly, I have visited my share of churches, programs, and ministries that do not welcome all people into their midst and don't include all in their life of faith. During research that I conducted a few years ago, I had a number of conversations with children who attended children's ministry programs at different congregations. While some of the children had nothing but great things to say about children's church, Sunday school, and mid-week programs, others did not sense that they fit or were welcomed for who they were.

One nine-year-old boy who I shall refer to as Caleb clearly had a symbol-centered approach to spirituality. He loved mysteries like the Bermuda Triangle and Stonehenge and he felt close to God in the great outdoors. Caleb knows that the Bible is full of mysteries about God, but he feels as though the leaders of the children's ministry programs at his congregation attempt to explain away all the wonders and mysteries surrounding who God is. In his words, "they're explaining the wrong things." "I feel like they're saying that there are no mysteries of him...when I know there are." This boy did not feel as though these ministries welcomed him for who he was. Aware that his congregation was not meeting his spiritual needs, young Caleb began reading the Bible in solitude, not to gain answers to questions about God, but to revel in the sense of wonder and mystery that the Bible allowed him to feel.

Not all children might be as insightful or resourceful as Caleb. Some children in situations similar to Caleb's might come to see that the reason they don't feel included in their faith communities and their programs is because there is something wrong with them. This can lead to unwarranted crises in faith and spirituality and can close children off from faith formation and having formative encounters with the living God. None of us want to see this happen. But everyday, unaware of different ways of knowing God, leaders, pastors, and teachers develop programs that cater to their own spiritual styles and unintentionally leave children who know God differently to struggle as they try to make sense of why they do not have the same experiences as the children and leaders around them.

In order to help all children open themselves to connecting with God and being formed in faith, congregations must take into account the different spiritual styles through which young people can come to know and experience God. Aware of spiritual styles, those who develop and lead programs with children can intentionally create environments in which young people of all spiritual styles are included and experience a satisfying degree of fit. Joyce Bellous writes,

Inclusive teachers [and churches] provide for the study of words, so that children become precise and make cognitive gains; offer opportunities to learn through feeling and open up occasions for telling personal stories and explaining what they mean, using the arts; allow time for silence, wonderment and imagination to set the agenda for interpreting experience; and bring children into settings where they can take specific, focused action aimed at improving the world. (Bellous, 102)

Although churches surely attempt to create environments conducive to spiritual formation and that help people to connect with God, many miss the mark and fail to include children of all spiritual styles. Those who do not feel a sense of fit are at risk of keeping their spiritual experiences and sensibilities private, robbing others of the richness of spiritual diversity (Bellous, 102). Including elements that speak to children of each style is vital for environments in which every child is welcomed, included, and nurtured.

There are countless models, methods, and practices for ministries that nurture faith formation in children and that can be quite effective for nurturing the spiritual lives of young people. Although ministry models and techniques which prove to be effective with one congregation might be inappropriate or unproductive at another, I believe that these suggestions, when employed, work to create environments of intentional inclusivity. The ideas I present are grounded in the real life of children who spoke with me over a six-month period. Through our conversations, I was able to get a sense of how children from each spiritual style have their spiritual lives nurtured, engage in faith formation, and come to know God.

Practices

More than Just Talking Heads: Practices for Nurturing Word- Centered Children

One of the central concerns of a word-centered approach of spirituality is the illumination of the mind. With this in mind, it makes sense that welcoming and nurturing children with a spirituality dominated by words involves assisting them in their intellectual quest to understand God and the world around them. The following six practices all have this goal in mind:

1. Focus on the Bible, but don't be limited to the Bible.

Children with a word-centered approach to spirituality hold the Bible in higher esteem than children with other spiritual styles. The Bible is regarded as the inspired Word of God, the very words that God uses to speak to humanity. Ministries, programs, and lessons need to help children build their biblical knowledge through memorization, study, interpretation and exegesis. Limiting instruction solely to the Bible can rob children of gaining insight into many other important fields of knowledge. Include lessons that teach children about church history, theology, liturgy, and social issues. Word-centered children soak up information so that they can better make sense of and interpret the world around them. Let's give them all the knowledge we can.

2. Let the Bible read children.

Learning about the Bible cannot be the sole goal of ministry with word-centered children. After all, as we read the Bible, it has the power to read us, to form us as faith-full disciples of Christ. By using the Bible as a mirror for their own lives, children can better understand themselves and they can come to see the ways in which God has interacted with humanity in the past and how God continues to speak to us today. The words in the Bible are not just there for us to memorize and exegete. The Scriptures have the power to inform, form, and transform our lives and the lives of the children with whom we interact. We must allow them to “get

under our skin” so that we can be formed and transformed by them. As we exegete the Bible, the Bible helps us to exegete ourselves.

3. Be aware of human development.

Children learn in many different ways as they grow from newborn infants into teenagers. Having a basic, working knowledge of key theories of human development can help pastors, teachers, and leaders to shape lessons in ways that best suit the learning and developmental capabilities of young people across the life-span. While young children struggle to understand abstract concepts and ideas, older children are able to go well beyond the memorization of simple facts and begin to interpret texts and ideas for themselves. The cognitive capacities of children ought to affect the ways in which we teach them. When we know more about how children grow, develop, and learn, we can better assist word-centered children in knowing about God and in turn knowing God. (An excellent introductory resource for aspects of human development is *Human Development and Faith* edited by Felicity Kelcourse.)

4. Avoid “dumbing-down” lessons.

God created all of us to have brains and bodies that develop gradually over time and affect the way we learn as we grow and change. We need not “dumb-down” our lessons and ministries for children. When we do not give them the respect they deserve simply because they learn differently than adults, we implicitly tell children that they are not valued. Children with a word-centered approach to spirituality thrive as they make gains in their cognitive knowledge of God and they can become frustrated by “dumbed-down” lessons with word-searches and other menial activities.

5. Become co-learners and welcome questions.

As teachers, pastors, and leaders, we can learn right alongside the children in our midst. None of us has all the answers. If we open ourselves to receiving new insights, even the most familiar of Bible stories and passages can teach us something new about God, faith, and life. As we instruct children and help them learn more about God, let us remember that we are all finite beings with limited knowledge about an infinite God. We can become co-learners

on the journey to know more of God and we can welcome children's questions. We can be honest when we are unsure of answers to their questions and we can seek out answers with the children in our midst.

6. Keep a well-stocked church library.

Churches can provide inclusive environments and ministries for word-centered children by making sure that they have access to a wide range of resources in their church libraries. Many of these children most vividly hear God's voice through reading. During my conversations with children, I heard several young people tell me that they feel incredibly close to God in church libraries, surrounded by a great cloud of written witnesses. In fact, for several of these children, the library was where they felt closest to God.

By having access to a resource-filled church library, children can not only satisfy their spiritual needs through reading about God, the church, and other spiritual and religious subjects; they can sense the very presence of God. Let's not forget to make time to read with the children to whom we minister. Why not set up a reading corner in your Sunday school or have a weekly story time in your congregation's library? When we read together with children we can joyfully learn with one another.

More than Just Feeling Good: Practices for Nurturing Emotion- Centered Children

In *Children in the Worshipping Community*, David Ng and Virginia Thomas state that "Music and children are a natural combination" (Ng and Thomas, 102). Their words are particularly true for children with a spiritual style that is dominated by feelings. Therefore, inclusive churches make room for these children by intentionally including music and the arts in their curriculum, ministries, and activities. There are at least five key ways in which leaders and pastors can welcome and nurture emotion-centered children.

1. Don't be limited by fads.

The Christian church has been singing songs to God for two thousand years. We have a rich and vast tradition that includes a wide variety of chants,

hymns, and choruses that can be used to help children connect with God—from Gregorian chants to contemporary rock music, African American spirituals to the meditative songs of the Taizé movement. By drawing from a wide variety of musical traditions, we can help children appreciate how Christians of other times and places used the universal language of music to worship and experience the living God.

Don Ratcliff, a Christian education professor at Wheaton College, has noted that Christians "make associations between their music and their emotions through classical conditioning... Later, although the religious experience may have been forgotten, the association between the feelings and certain music selections may remain." The music that children listen to in their congregations can have a considerable impact them in the years to come, so it is best to expose them to a variety of different styles of music within an inclusive and accepting environment.

2. Don't forget the lyrics.

When selecting music for children, it is important to take the lyrical content of songs into consideration. Music can certainly evoke strong emotions, but it also conveys theological ideas through lyrics. Choose songs with lyrics that can be understood by children but also espouse deep theology that is appropriate for your context and tradition. Finding songs with lyrics that are simple *and* theologically rich can be difficult work, but it will help children to have emotional experiences that are enveloped within a theology that is upheld by their tradition and community. Perhaps you can introduce songs by explaining who wrote them, what they are about, and what words like "Hallelujah" mean.

3. Think about consumption and creation.

In today's mass-marketed world, children are often seen as consumers. They are the direct targets of advertisers, who seek to help them develop brand loyalty and learn to become good consumers. It can be easy to overlook the fact that young people are inherently creators as well. They are imaginative, artistic, and creative. We can help children write new lyrics to a familiar tune or provide simple instruments that even young children can use to make music to God. Whether they are a 21st-century Mozart or completely tone-deaf, all children are capable of making beautiful music to God.

4. Go beyond music.

While music may be a more common way to evoke emotional connections to God, it is certainly not the only way. Emotion-centered children can also be nurtured through other art forms, including drama and dance. Organize a drama or dance program at your congregation and allow the children involved in it to perform for their friends and family members or, even better, the entire congregation? One young boy that I spoke with said he felt closest to God when he was in front of his faith community performing in his church's Christmas pageant. Dance and drama can assist children in expressing their inner lives in creative ways and these art forms have the power to help children feel the presence of their divine Creator.

5. Make room in corporate worship.

Gretchen Wolff Pritchard wrote that "adults come to church on Sunday in order to worship; children come to Sunday school to acquire information" (Pritchard, 140-141). One of the most formative elements of the life of a congregation is communal worship. It is through worshipping as a congregation that the many different people come together as one to praise God. But children are not always present to participate in congregational worship.

If we include children in this formative practice that is central to the life of congregations, we can help them see that they are a part of something greater than themselves. We can show them that they are part of a great cloud of witnesses, that transcends space and time, who use their whole selves—including their emotions—to connect with God. By including children in our times of worship and praise, we help them become formed into members of our faith communities who seek out ways of authentically experiencing God.

More than Just Silence: Practices for Nurturing Symbol- Centered Children

It is not uncommon for people with a symbol-centered approach to spirituality to feel uncomfortable or unwelcomed in congregational programs and ministries. Since God is seen as ineffable mystery, churches and lessons that focus on learning about God can be seen as robbing God

of the very attributes that make God what and who God is. It is possible to create environments that nurture symbol-centered children. There are a number of practices that congregations can utilize in forming an environment to nurture children with this spiritual style.

1. Prayer matters.

A spiritual environment for children with a symbol-centered approach to spirituality can be formed through times and spaces that are intentionally dedicated to prayer. For these children, personal prayer is a key means for having intimate and personal connections with the transcendent God.

Leaders, pastors, and teachers can include several different types of prayer in their ministries, including quiet, inner prayer, "breath" prayers, or call-and-response prayers. Children can even be given opportunities to lead one another in different styles of prayer that they might prefer. One practice that I have found particularly helpful is to create a semi-private "prayer corner" by partitioning off a corner of a room with room dividers. Children can go to prayer corners to retreat from noise and crowds and to spend some time alone in quiet prayer with God.

2. Keep things open.

I have found that symbol-centered children are particularly affected by the spaces in which they meet for children's programs and ministries. It is not uncommon for them to be negatively affected by these spaces. They tend to prefer wide, open spaces. One young girl that I spoke with told me that her church's Sunday school rooms make her "feel all shoved up—like I'm being crammed inside of a locker."

Whenever possible, provide children with large, open spaces. Should your church building not allow for enough space, try simple decorating tips like painting the walls a lighter color, using smaller furniture, and ensuring that the room is not cluttered. If the weather cooperates, why not hold programs and ministries outside, where children can be free from the obstruction of four walls?

3. Get back to nature.

Children with this spiritual style experience God among the natural world. They sense God's presence as they listen to water trickle down a river, smell the

aroma of wildflowers, or watch the snow fall on a winter's morning. If leaders and pastors wish to help children sense God's presence, they do well to go outside with them.

There are many practices that can help children to encounter God among God's creation: take children on nature walks, help them plant gardens and nurture vegetable plants, sit with them and quietly feel and listen to the wind, and have them share what they love about nature. All of these practices can combat what Richard Louv calls "nature-deficit disorder," a lack of exposure to the natural world. Spending time among nature reminds us not only of the beauty of God's creation, but also the fragility of nature. These practices can foster a sense of creation care among children.

4. Pay attention to pace and volume.

Thomas à Kempis once wrote, "In the silence and quietness of heart a devout soul profiteth much...that she may be so much the more familiar with God" (Kempis, 41). Nurturing children with a symbol-centered spirituality involves creating sacred spaces and times. This can be accomplished through a slow pace, a quiet environment, and an opportunity for stillness.

While some people might argue that quiet and stillness are tell-tale signs of boredom, symbol-centered children demonstrate the richness of a silence that allows them hear God's voice and a slowness that calms them enough to sense God's presence. Rather than leading to boredom, a quiet, calm pace of ministries can evoke a sense of reverence and wonder among young people. Why not try some breathing exercises to assist the children in becoming calm and getting in touch not only with God, but with their inner selves. Of course, the entire time of a ministry or program need not be slow and quiet. But it is important to, at times, create a calm, quiet, and tranquil space.

5. Nurture a sense of mystery, reverence, and awe.

Ministries that meet the spiritual needs of mystics approach God with mystery, wonder, reverence, and awe. God is seen as an infinite, transcendent, ineffable being that is worthy of our wonder and reverence. These children hold that God cannot be completely understood and they are content to marvel at the mystery that is God.

Instead of simply teaching children *about* God, pastors, teachers, and leaders can nurture these children by wondering together with them about the God who transcends words. Jerome Berryman has found that when adults express wonder, reverence, and awe toward God, it allows children time and space to do likewise (Berryman, 62). It allows the self to have spirit-to-Spirit connections to the God of wonders. An excellent resource for wondering alongside children is *Godly Play*. Created by Berryman, *Godly Play* is an "imaginative approach to religious education" that evokes a sense of wonder not only in children, but in people of all ages.

6. Saturate spaces with symbols and rituals.

Creating spaces that stir up a sense of mystery, reverence, wonder, and awe can include adding symbols and rituals to ministries and programs. Some traditions and congregations are already bursting with rituals and symbols. But we need to ensure that children have access to their richness. If your congregation is fairly free of rituals and symbols, you can try adding simple ones to your ministries and spaces. Rituals like foot washing, the passing of the peace, and candle lighting as well as symbols such as the cross, religious artwork, seasonal banners, and stained-glass windows can help children connect with God, feel included in the faith community, and form their identities as members of their communities of practice. Why not have children create rituals and symbols for their ministries and programs? They can think together about how to symbolize different aspects of faith and life through simple rituals and they can create their own symbols, like making stained-glass windows out of cellophane and tissue paper.

We can also help symbol-centered children connect with God by taking Brian McLaren's advice and begin "faithing our practices" (McLaren, 184). When we faith our practices, we connect simple elements of our everyday lives with God's cosmic presence and story. Passing out a snack can be a symbol for welcoming the stranger. Washing our hands can represent how God washes us clean. The possibilities are endless.

More than Just Getting Things Done: Practices for Nurturing Action- Centered Children

In browsing through the prepackaged, marketed curricula available from Christian bookstores and publishers, few (if any) seem to be geared toward satisfying the spiritual needs of children with an action-centered approach to spirituality. The “application-oriented” teachings of many mass-marketed curricula and programs too often focus on individual choices and personal morals and fail to nurture the world-changing drive of these children. These young people need to go beyond reminders to share their toys. They need to meet children who have no toys, go on “toy fasts,” organize toy drives, and fight for justice in the lives of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized.

Even through pre-packaged curricula that intentionally nurture action-centered children might be difficult to come by, there are a number of practices that, when utilized, can help action-centered children to be nurtured and feel included in their faith communities.

1. Provide opportunities to see the tears in their eyes.

Children with an action-centered approach to spirituality need to be in the world, being agents of change and helping bring about the fullness of God’s reign. Communities who wish to nurture and include these children do well to provide them with opportunities not only to serve those who are in need, but also to meet and get to know them, to see the tears in their eyes (Frost, 263).

Although this can be risky, helping children to have first-hand encounters with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized is incredibly meaningful to those who have an action-centered approach to spirituality. Through these encounters, children can become one with the “other” in solidarity against poverty, racism, oppression, and exploitation. These experiences of coming to know people they are trying to help can keep action-centered children grounded in reality and they can assist them in getting to know what needs to be done to truly help those in need.

2. Do it gradually.

Children need *gradual* opportunities to meet and serve those in need. In an article I wrote with Brian McLaren, Dan Jennings, and Karen-Marie Yust, we offer the following suggestion for gradually helping children to get to know those living in poverty or oppression:

A suburban preschool child might begin with her family sponsoring a child in Africa. In her elementary years, she might experience a summer exchange program with Native American children, leading to an inner-city immersion in middle school, followed by spending a summer among the urban poor in high school. Or a family might affiliate with a single helping organization, such as Habitat for Humanity, and involve their children first in limited contact activities (fundraising, food contributions), then at a moderate level (landscaping and words of support), and finally in full engagement (building alongside family members). (Csinos, et al., 19)

When teaching children about injustice by assisting them to meet those suffering from injustice, be careful not to do too much too soon. Start small, but don’t stay small. Keep in mind that we often grow when we are slightly out of our comfort zones. The spiritual formation of action-centered children involves providing them with opportunities to gradually get to know people who are poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

3. Don’t be overprotective.

Of course, we need to ensure that our children remain safe as they work towards a just and peaceful world. We don’t want to intentionally put our children in harm’s way. Pastors and teachers are, after all, charged with the task of helping to raise children in safe, loving, and nurturing environments. But safety need not compromise opportunities to make a difference. In fact, nurturing action-centered children might involve providing them with opportunities, when they are ready and willing, to step outside of their comfort zones.

Instead of completely sheltering young people from injustices in the world, we can teach children about God’s desire for them to bring about changes for the betterment of the global community. Often,

children are seen as too young to learn about the evils and struggles of the world. Ironically, however, too many children across the globe are not sheltered enough—they live as slaves, soldiers, and prostitutes.

Perhaps a first step is to educate our children about the injustices in the world and how to protect ourselves (and others) as we seek to eliminate these injustices. Be careful not to do too much too soon. We don't want to traumatize our children. While it is vital for us to protect our children, let's not make the all-to-common mistake of *overprotecting* them.

4. Do it in community.

None of us can do the difficult work of fighting for peace and justice by ourselves. Thus, one key way to help action-centered children get down to work and make a difference is to provide opportunities for them to be involved in service projects alongside a diverse group of adults.

For one young girl that I have come to know, working alongside her congregation as a legitimate and valuable member was a significant way in which she came to know God and feel included in her community. And when children serve the poor and advocate for the oppressed with caring adults and peers, they can feel safe as they step outside their comfort zones and experience growth. After all, they wouldn't be doing it alone.

5. Offer space for reflection.

Action-centered children can often get caught up in getting things done, in working to bring about positive changes in the world around them. They can forget about themselves and neglect the important work of self-care. In time, this can lead to burnout, personal crises, and severe doubt about one's life mission and vocation.

Leaders, pastors, and parents need to remind action-centered children of the importance of personal reflection and respite. There are several ways to help children express and reflect on their quests to change the world. They can write stories or poems, draw pictures, act out their experiences, and sing songs that express their desire for justice. Reflection can be personal or can occur in groups as children speak with one another about their desires to make a difference and how they are working to fight injustice. Having times of rest and reflection, when children can focus on what is going on within themselves as they help those around them, is a vital

aspect of faith formation. But it can be easily overlooked action-centered people who are focused on getting things done.

Concluding Thoughts

Creating inclusive environments in which all children can be nurtured based on their spiritual styles is not as complicated as one might think. Sometimes, the simplest approaches are also the most effective. Why deplete budgets on resources and curricula to create fast-paced, action-packed programs for children, when reading a good book, going on nature walks, singing simple yet meaningful hymns, or using one's imagination to wonder about God might be more effective at forming children in the faith?

Keep in mind the key goals in creating environments saturated with elements of each spiritual style: faith formation, spiritual nourishment, and encounters with our living God. The goal is not just to have children become knowledgeable, emotional, awe-struck, and focused on getting things done. When we forget about the ultimate objectives of children's ministry, we can become caught up in excessive intellectualism, emotionalism, mysticism, and encratism. But when we remember that knowing God and being formed in faith are the purposes of ministry, we can better make use of the many practices that nurture children of each style.

Some of the best ministries and most effective spiritual environments include contrasting characteristics of each spiritual style. Words alone are not able to meaningfully connect all children to God. But when words are balanced with actions, emotions, and symbols, every child involved can be welcomed and invited to encounter God according to their spiritual styles. And, in an important way, young people can also be challenged and stretched to move beyond their dominant styles and discover other ways in which children connect with God. While I fail to see how any one of the practices that I offered can be inclusive of young people of all spiritual styles, when practices for each style are juxtaposed, every child can feel a sense of inclusivity and fit within a balanced and welcoming spiritual environment.

It is crucial for leaders, pastors, and teachers to include practices for children of each spiritual style so that children can avoid becoming so embedded in

their dominant styles that they fall into one of the aberrations or extreme forms of spiritual styles. However, if a balanced tension between elements of all four styles exists, children are more likely to develop a balanced spirituality. They are also more apt to understand that there are many ways that people express what matters to them and connect with God in real and formative ways. Such a balanced sensitivity to the many ways of expressing spirituality and faith is a mark of churches that provide all children with a healthy sense of inclusivity and fit.

Notes

- ¹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Bible Context Exam," <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/prep4min/bible-content-exam>.
- ² Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, "What We Believe," www.paoc.org/about/what-we-believe.

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