



Review

Ivy Beckwith,
Formational Children's Ministries:
Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual, and Relationship.
(Baker, 2010). 154 pages. \$15.99.

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“The way we do Children’s Ministry in many of our North American churches is broken,” says Ivy Beckwith, and “everything must change.” Without a radical shift in the model the Church uses to educate children in the Christian faith, she writes, sounding the alarm to both newcomers and veterans in the field, children’s ministry itself will die.

Beckwith speaks with authority on this topic, as she has devoted much of her long and distinguished career to educational and children's ministries. Her argument that "we desperately need to think outside the box" comes after years of work in a range of congregations and denominations. She is currently the Minister for Children and Families at the Congregational Church of New Canaan, Connecticut, though she grew up in a conservative Baptist Church, received her Master's degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and her Ph.D. from Trinity International University, and served several large non-denominational congregations in the Midwest. Beckwith has seen and implemented a variety of ministry models, in other words, and she draws from her wealth of experience to make her case.

This experience has led her to conclude that the Church must completely reorient and expand its goals for children's Christian education. Instead of a narrow focus on cognitive learning of Bible stories, churches need to concentrate on forming children's relationships with God and nurturing faithfulness in their total way of life. Her holistic and compelling claim is that we need to "help children live God's story, not just learn it"; our aim should be nothing less than to "capture children's imaginations for the kingdom of God."

The way to do that, Beckwith believes, is through an increased emphasis on story, ritual, and relationship. She devotes four chapters to story, and three chapters each to the other two topics. Throughout, she includes theological insights and justification, descriptive passages about the contemporary context of ministry with families, and practical examples of what formational ministry might look like within that context.

In one of her strongest chapters, "The Child and God's Story," Beckwith gives a brief summary of changes in human understandings of the Bible over time. For many years, she says, referencing John W. Wright's *Telling God's Story*, believers read the Bible as a narrative through which they could learn about God and themselves. But the Enlightenment and modernism encouraged critical and rational reading of scripture, and those of us who preach and teach have

“inserted our own interpretations into [these biblical narratives],” thus “robbing them of the ability to be powerful vehicles of spiritual formation.” Here, even as Beckwith makes a valid argument about the pitfalls of historical and critical exegesis, especially in telling Bible stories to young children, one wishes she had also affirmed the value of such methods—not merely for their intellectual edification but for the ways they, too, can contribute to God’s revelation in scripture.

That criticism aside, she helps readers with her caution that youth and children’s curricula and Bible interpretations are particularly skewed, as they have been written to lead the learner to a main point or a “life application.” Such linear renderings of the texts deprive readers and listeners of the mystery of sacred stories and of the opportunity for independent, context-determined interpretations. More troubling, Beckwith fears, is that when God’s stories are told in a way that drives at a single lesson, chances are good that children will not find the stories engaging—and when there is no engagement, there is no enduring growth in faith.

The solution is to tell Bible stories in a different way, “letting the story be the story and tell its own truth to us.” She proposes that teachers imagine their educational time with children as a wheel with spokes, not a straight line; the axle is the Bible story and the spokes are the conversations with children that grow out of the story. Developing this model further, Beckwith draws from Charles Foster’s *Educating Congregations* to suggest a formation-based learning rubric: prepare, engage, reflect. Teaching Bible stories using this model allows children to enter into the mystery of the text, where God may speak to them in ways that are uniquely meaningful. In order to form children’s faith, teachers must let go of the one-conclusion model and trust that through the grace of the Holy Spirit, the story, children, and God’s word will interact to reveal a truth that shapes the child beyond any curriculum’s or teacher’s best-laid plans.

There is much to commend in Beckwith’s proposed model. In fact, others have said the same thing for years. As often as Beckwith refers to contemporary sources throughout her book

(*The Way of the Child*, by Wynn McGregor; *To Dance with God*, by Gertrude Mueller Nelson; *Family: The Forming Center*, by Marjorie Thompson; *Christly Gestures*, by Brett Webb-Mitchell; *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, by Mark Yaconelli), it is odd that in the chapter about formational methods of biblical storytelling she makes no mention of Jerome Berryman's *Godly Play*, which came out in 1979. Nor does she mention the Workshop Rotation model of Sunday School, used by churches since 1990, or *Seasons of the Spirit*, a commonly-known lectionary-based curriculum. All three of these curricula aim to bring the stories to life for children in guided but reflective ways, leaving much of the interpretation to the mystery of God's revelation in children's experiences and imaginations. Beckwith's point about telling Bible stories in open-ended ways is well-taken, but she could give readers more hope about how to do this well if she mentioned these excellent curricula; teachers should think about their lesson plans as a wheel, but not a wheel they have to reinvent.

Beckwith is absolutely correct in another chapter, "The Child and the Story of God's Church," when claiming that there are few curricula about church history for children. She is right, too, that children's spiritual lives are enhanced by the understanding that they belong to a movement several thousand years old. And she approaches the prophetic when she calls Protestant churches to task for focusing what little history education they provide on the Reformation and beyond, suggesting that we may still harbor an anti-Catholic bias. Churches do need to find ways to convey the entire ecclesial narrative to the youngest generation, but what is currently available are intriguing stories about individual people or particular movements, not comprehensive histories. On this note, Beckwith makes a solid case for children's ministers and teachers having some homework to do.

Beckwith goes too far, however, when she claims that other than lack of sufficient Sunday morning classroom time (a major issue—my own congregation's Sunday School program runs for 30 Sundays, mid-September to mid-May, and average attendance is twice a

month), one of the reasons children have a church history deficit is that “most people seem to think of history as boring.” Several years ago, I had one of the most riveting conversations I have ever had with a group of young children; the topic was Martin Luther and the Reformation. I know other colleagues who have had similar experiences. Contrary to Beckwith’s assessment, there are plenty of kids and Christian educators who think history is interesting. Here, as in a few other places in the book, Beckwith makes a sweeping statement that does not serve her well. Earlier she says that linear instruction is not good for Generations X and Y, kids born in 1982 or later, thus the need for alternate models. But she should know that educators cannot convincingly paint an entire generation’s learning style in broad strokes and that linear teaching does work well for some kids. Surely Beckwith is aware of multiple intelligence theories, applied to many church curricula, which assume that different children have different ways of learning.

Such generalizations weaken Beckwith’s argument slightly, but the way she expands the Christian story to include church history as well as congregational and personal faith stories is extremely helpful. My own congregation is currently observing its centennial, and after reading the chapter, “The Child and the Story of the Faith Community,” I plan to send a special communication to our families encouraging them to attend the upcoming celebration. Kids need to know some of the founders of our congregation; they need to visit our old, much smaller, church campus; and they need to understand how they themselves are part of the ongoing, unfolding story of God’s people in this particular place. I am grateful to Beckwith for the prompt.

Beckwith’s chapters on ritual also offer some valuable insights, but again the information is not new and she omits key resources. When she talks about integrating children into worship, for instance, she does not mention the vast body of work on this subject. A classic text about welcoming children into the sanctuary, *Children in the Worshiping Community*, by David Ng and Virginia Thomas, published in 1981, never comes up. In her third chapter in the ritual section, “Facilitating Spiritual Formation through Spiritual Disciplines,” she describes ways to meditate,

pray, fast, and serve with children, and she offers some good suggestions for how to engage these practices. The chapter would be enriched, however, by a reference to the popular *Practicing Our Faith* series of books that Dorothy C. Bass and her colleagues at the Valparaiso Project have written; many of the Christian practices these books highlight can be easily modified to suit children's context.

In her final chapters, on spiritual formation through relationship, Beckwith skillfully delineates the different kinds of relationships that children are in: family, intergenerational, and peer. These three spheres of relationship all have the potential to nurture children's faith formation, and the Church's challenging job is to find creative ways to bring that potential to fruition. Once more, Beckwith helps the reader see the bigger picture.

One frustration in these last chapters, especially the chapter "Facilitating Formation Through Peer-to-Peer Relationships," is Beckwith's wished-for world versus the realities that some church-going families face. "It would be great," she writes, "if some of the child's peer relationships were with other kids who have been involved in the same processes of transformation and spiritual formation." Yes, it would be great, but often it is not so. Among my fifth grade daughter's closest friends are a Catholic, a Jew, and several agnostics. None of her friends go to our church, and she is increasingly unwilling to attend Sunday School "because she doesn't know anyone." I have heard similar things from parents of younger children, and have begun offering monthly, casual gatherings in the nearby park and pool for families who don't know each other to spend time together. Yet friendship cannot be forced. As for my daughter and other kids in the congregation, it would be ideal if they had close relationships among their peers in the faith community, but they simply do not.

Beckwith does readers a service by naming challenging issues in children's ministry. She never says this kind of ministry is going to be easy. To the contrary, and with refreshing honesty, she notes the obstacles to the changes she proposes throughout the book. With so many different

pressures and obligations and value systems weighing on families and children in our society, the Church has more competition than ever, but more responsibility as well.

When Ivy Beckwith makes a passionate plea to take that responsibility seriously, those of us who minister with children need to listen. While there are many different resources on the themes she covers, and hence more signs of life and creative thinking than she indicates, few books connect the themes so comprehensively. For its broad perspective and invigorating reframing of the essence of the Church's ministry with children, this book deserves study time for any pastor or Christian educator who hopes to nurture the faith of the youngest generation.