



Review

David M. Csinos,

Children's Ministry that Fits:

Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approaches to Nurturing Children's Spirituality

(Wipf & Stock, 2011). 173 pages, \$22.00

Reviewer: Kathy Dawson

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David Csinos would like the church to start listening to children in the formulation of its children's ministry. He speaks against the view that some adults have in teaching children that they come as empty identical containers to church ready to be filled with

knowledge of the Bible, church history, and responsible living. This type of teaching is what Csinos terms “One-Size-Fits-All” children’s ministry. It does not take into account the uniqueness of children’s lives of faith, but treats each child the same.

To explore a different way to approach children’s ministry, Csinos undertook a graduate research project with thirteen children between the ages of seven and ten from three different churches. Two of these churches were from a conversion or believers’ baptism tradition and the third was from a covenantal or infant baptism tradition. In his exploration of these children’s voices he used a variety of qualitative methods in order to hear the children’s voices. These included focus groups at each church, social mapping, photography activities, and interviews with the parents.

He organized the data obtained through these methods around four spiritual styles from his work with Joyce Bellous (Bellous and Csinos, “Spiritual Styles: Creating and Environment to Nurture Spiritual Wholeness,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 14:3, 2009). These spiritual styles include: 1) a word-centered approach, 2) an emotion-centered approach, 3) a symbol-centered approach, and 4) an action-centered approach. Through the transcripts, mapping, and photos he obtained during his research, Csinos was able to place at least one child in each of these approaches. The word-centered children tended to speak about the Bible and classroom learning. Reading, writing, and speaking are ways that children using this style will often express their faith. The emotion-centered children tended to talk about worship and music as the center of their faith. Csinos contends that this has been the dominant style within most Protestant churches. Symbol-centered children focus on prayer and symbols in nature as their dominant expressions of

an inward faith, while action-centered children tend to focus on social justice activities of helping others as their faith expression. The author does not advocate a shift to one style of teaching over another, but wants the church and home to embrace a variety of approaches to meet the needs of these different spiritual styles.

This type of thinking bears some kinship to other recent approaches to multi-faceted learning such as Multiple Intelligences Theory, various other learning style advocates, and multisensory learning. What may make these spiritual styles more unique from a Christian education standpoint is their linkage to historical ways of being church rather than being borrowed from general education sources.

After laying out these four spiritual types, Csinos uses the remainder of the book to explore how these spiritual styles might be addressed in Christian education. He draws on a wide array of educational methods to offer the church a multi-faceted approach to children's ministry. He sees storytelling as being one method that addresses all four styles in some way. He also offers other tactics that are more specific to individual styles. The appendix offers even more ideas for church educators and parents to use with children who fit within this four-fold framework.

In offering a critique to this work, I must begin by saying that I have many points of agreement with Csinos' project. He is passionate that children's ministry should be both formational and transformational in addition to informational. He points out flaws in thinking that have been perpetuated in Christian education programs for decades, because they offer easy and manageable solutions to dealing with children, although they may hinder the growth of children's faith. Csinos offers many practical helps for churches

wishing to break out of the way things have always been done. He also is gracious in giving credit to other educators who offer educational methodologies that are consonant with the goals he sets out.

Where I find dissonance in his writing is around the four spiritual styles. In chapter three we get to hear a little of the voices of the individual children, but being committed to this particular framework seems to lose the unique voice of each child. In essence he has sacrificed a Robert Coles approach to hearing each child on his or her own terms, by offering a framework that makes it easier for a church to continue to do children's ministry in a programmatic way rather than adopting perhaps an apprenticeship/mentoring model that would individualize children's ministry even further.

In thinking about the spiritual styles themselves, I wondered if they were more complex than was detailed in the book. For instance, the emotion-centered approach focused almost entirely on music as its expression. It would seem that this approach could be more complex, including not only other art forms such as dance and drama, but also sensitivity to the hurts of others or reactions to a powerful testimony of faith. I wondered how influential the denominational history and cultural make up of the congregation was as to the dominant styles in evidence. Also, did the parents' spiritual styles have any influence on the children's choices of faith expression? There seems to be room for further exploration and development of these styles in other contexts.

Finally, there is the question of the audience of this book. David Csinos sees his book as appealing to "pastors, parents, students, scholars (or someone else altogether)" (Csinos, page 4). To focus this a little more, I believe this book will be helpful to churches who are

wanting to make a change in the way that they are doing children's ministry that more meets the needs of a variety of children rather than the demands of a particular curriculum resource. It offers an easy to manage framework and many helpful ideas for doing this.

In addition to these churches, I believe this book is a good introductory guide to current thought in children's ministry for the undergraduate level. It introduces some of the major voices that could be explored on their own terms in subsequent classes. For graduate students, this book could be used as an example of a well-designed graduate research project using some innovative qualitative research methods to explore the faith of children.

However it is used, this book does offer another prophetic voice speaking strongly to the importance of listening to children. As Jesus indicated to the disciples, by welcoming children we are welcoming God (Mark 9:37).