



THE SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE OF CHILDREN

BY JEROME W. BERRYMAN

The growing interest in the spiritual guidance of children provides an exciting new context for *Faith Practices*, the new congregational resource being produced by the United Church of Christ. I have been asked to comment on this context and suggest some supplemental resources for UCC teachers from my recent publications and elsewhere.

First, let's look at the big picture. My *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* was published in 2009. It traces the history of what theologians have said about children and the experience their views were based on. Some twenty-five theologians were reviewed and four themes emerged from this study: ambivalence, ambiguity,

indifference, and grace. These themes form the implied, or *de facto*, doctrine of children that still shapes the church today. This confusion needs to be cleared away, so children, as a means of grace, can be more clearly recognized and nourished.

A practical companion to *Children and the Theologians* was also published last year. It is *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*. This is a revised and expanded, second edition of a book published in 1995. It begins by discussing why serious-serene play is important to nourish children's spirituality and then moves the reader through the process of how to mentor children so they can enter

adolescence with an inner working model of the Christian language system. This system includes sacred stories, parables, liturgical action, and contemplative silence. It needs to be internalized and functioning by adolescence so it is available in a deeply rooted, yet open and creative way, to help young people develop their larger, more conscious, and increasingly flexible identity during this important time in life. They need the security and creativity of "playful orthodoxy" to encounter new situations, new people, new ideas, and other religions in constructive ways. This method can support your own curriculum and there may also be supportive ideas for your teaching in the eight volumes of *The Complete Guide To Godly Play* that can also help.

In addition to the above resources in theology, method, and curriculum, there also has been a great deal written recently about the spirituality of children. I would like to mention three key books from this growing collection. They are David Hay's and Rebecca Nye's *The Spirit of the Child*; Rebecca Nye's *Children's Spirituality (What It Is and Why It Matters)*; and Brendan Hyde's *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning*

If churches were places of consistent warmth and attunement for children then children could become more securely attached to God, the church, and primary others in the community. If secure attachment were made the priority for ministry then church growth would take care of itself because the children would return to mother church, not because of skillful marketing, but because it is their nature to seek healthy attachment and flee from situations that promote the dysfunctional communities of insecure attachment.

Jerome W. Berryman,
Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace



and Connectedness. My own 1991 book *Godly Play* is also useful. There is even a scholarly journal now available, published in England, called *The International Journal of Children's Spirituality* to support your work.

Finally, an exciting new opportunity has just become

available at General Seminary in New York City. Beginning in the fall of 2010, a certificate and an M.A. will be offered in the spiritual guidance of children. General is the oldest of the Episcopal seminaries, but all qualified students are welcome. The theology, foundational theory, method,

and practice of *Godly Play* are emphasized and creative new ways of distance learning are being developed. The Center for the Theology of Childhood has been jointly developed by General Seminary and the Godly Play Foundation to serve the children of the world.

A mother came up to me after church. She was determined to get my attention. As the other people drifted away, she remained and finally said firmly that there was something I needed to know.

"Yes?"

"Our daughter saw you going by before church. You didn't notice us. You were on your way to the sacristy."

"That is a busy time."

"Here is what you need to know. Our daughter said, 'There goes the man who is always glad to see me.'"

What if you were remembered by the children of your church as the person who is always glad to see them?

As [this] custom spreads throughout the congregation and people become warm, consistent, and attuned to children—I predict that your church will change and, as Jesus said, you will slowly over time discover that when you welcome a child you welcome him and the One who sent him.

Jerome W. Berryman,
Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace

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