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Joining Children on Their Spiritual Journey by Catherine Stonehouse  
Book Review by: Jayna Coppedge

When I read a book I take notes so that I may do a word search when I am trying to find a quote or passage I want to reread. The following are my notes taken from "Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey". Perhaps the following may do more than inform you; it may whet your appetite to read the book. I found it easily on some of the online book websites.

Page 26 ó The people of Israel used visual symbols to remind them of God. When fathers prayed, they strapped to their left hand and forehead small leather boxes containing selected verses from the Law. Selected verses were also placed in little boxes called mezuzahs and attached to the doorposts of the house. Each time they passed through the doorway, the Jews touched the mezuzah and were thus frequently reminded of God's law.

Page 27 ó God wants children to live in homes and a community where the laws of God are not just recited and talked about but lived. Children need to see and experience faith in action. This experience would raise the child's curiosity. The questions would come: Why do we do this? What does it mean? Moses did not say, "If your children ask"; he said, "When your children ask" (Deut. 6:20). The godly life will raise questions in the child's mind.

Page 27 ó We can tell children the story of God's work in our lives. Moses does not recommend a theological lecture; children benefit more by hearing the stories that carry the theology. For the Jews, the stories we find in the Old Testament were the stories of their families. Our children need to hear the Bible stories of the people of God, and they also need to hear contemporary stories of how God has worked in our personal lives, in our families, and in our faith community.

Page 29 ó At the beginning of the Passover meal, a piece of unleavened bread is hidden; near the end, the children hunt for the bread, and the finder receives a prize. There are activities and fun, as well as unusual tastes, a beautiful candlelit setting, stories, songs and the reciting of Scripture, all experienced by the family together. Such a tangible, sensory experience powerfully communicates awe, wonder, and an identity with the people of God whose story is told.

The other two feasts, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Booths, were times of thanksgiving. The Festival of Weeks was a day of joyful thanksgiving to celebrate the completion of harvest. The Festival of Booths began with a celebration when everyone came together waving branches to praise God. For seven days families lived in shelters they had built from the boughs of trees. Children very much enjoyed these events. They did it so that each generation would know their ancestors had lived in booths when God brought them out of Egypt so that they would know the story and also know "I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 23:43).

During Bible times, each of these celebrations took place in the designated location for worship, which meant they were national celebrations. Families traveled to the tabernacle or the temple three times a year. Not just nuclear families but the people of God as a whole were bonded together as they worshiped their God and remembered his mighty acts for them. In those gatherings children developed a deep sense of identity.

Page 30 ó The children with whom I worship are also fascinated with symbols of our faith. Children visiting our worship center are attracted to the colorful materials on the tabernacle story tray. Frequently they ask to hear that story, and I tell them how the people of God needed a way to come close to God. Children watch spellbound as I set out the ark of the covenant, the altar of incense, the table of shewbread, and the menorah. I then set in place the tabernacle with its outer room and the Holy of Holies. Next I move the priest figure into the tent, between the table of shewbread and the menorah, through the sweet smelling incense and smoke, through the veil into the Holy of Holies to be close to the ark of the covenant and close to God. One worshiper, Mark, watched for the first time as I placed the coverings over the tent. "Oooh," he softly exclaimed as the fur covering was added. When the tabernacle was completed, David, another young observer, said, "I wish our church was like that," and Franklin, engrossed in the story, bent low to peek through the door.

í You will notice that the observances described above were for the whole community of faith.



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Page 33 ó The early Christians met in homes for worship, teaching, learning, and fellowship. Since whole families would be there, we assume children participated alongside the adults in the Christian community. The Scriptures of the New Testament church were the Old Testament, which provided them with the instructions we have already examined regarding children in the faith community.

Page 36 ó Jesus healed children and at least once used an illustration from their dramatic play in a sermon (Matt. 11:16-17). Children were present at the feeding of the five thousand (Matt. 14:13-21), the feeding of the four thousand (Matt. 15:32-39), and likely much of the time when Jesus taught and healed publicly. Children were a welcome part of his life. After the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus cleansed the temple and then healed those who came to him. The children were there still shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David." When the priests objected, Jesus said, "Have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'" (Matt. 21:15-16). Did the children understand the meaning of "Hosanna to the Son of David"? Probably not, but Jesus accepted the praise of their hearts as natural, valued praise to God.

Page 37 - John Westerhoff claims that religion, but not faith, can be taught. Faith must be inspired within a faith community. Children's ministries cannot be done in isolation; it requires a community of faith. The spiritual health of the adults and the life in that community impact children. The faith of children is most likely to grow when they have the opportunity to associate with adults who are growing persons who know and love God. The child's faith is inspired when he or she belongs to an inclusive community that seeks to live out

God's love. Look at your church. Is it a community where faith is alive? Those who care about children will work and pray for the spiritual health of the whole community.

Page 41 ó You are probably thinking this sounds like a lot of work. True, it is easier to do it ourselves and not to worry about the children outside the programs designed for them. But remember, Jesus valued children profoundly. Jesus says, let the children come to me. Do not stop them with boredom or by simply entertaining them in another location until their parents finish worshipping. Welcome them in Jesus' name. Make adjustments that will serve them, knowing that adults benefit from what helps children learn. And do not look down on their faith; it is real, beautifully simple, and alive. Never forget, it is as important to nurture the faith of a child as it is the faith of a teenager or an adult.

Page 66 - The church nursery must be a trustable place. Are there familiar faces to greet the babies from week to week? In churches with a rotating staff in the nursery, it is best to have at least one person who is there consistently. Are there enough nursery workers to meet the babies' needs promptly and to hold those crying for comfort? In the nursery few spoken lessons are taught, but babies can experience church as a trustable, comforting place. They can be enfolded in the trusting faith and love of those who care for them.

Page 67 ó As children begin to develop new skills such as reading, writing, singing, or playing an instrument, they can feel affirmed in their worth if they can make real contributions at church. It is important to find ways for all children to contribute with their various levels of maturity and different gifts. Sunday school teachers face the challenge of allowing children to demonstrate their reading and writing abilities, while at the same time not embarrassing children whose skills are not as developed. Choirs are an excellent way for many children to minister to the whole congregation, and non-singers could read Scripture in a worship service or play during an offertory. Take inventory: How does your church encourage children to take a meaningful part in the work of the church? Which children have not found a place? What might interest them? With whom might the child work?

Page 94 ó Researchers have found that children who had religious education or character education classes were no less likely to cheat, lie, or steal than were the children who had not had moral instruction classes. Apparently teaching children what is right or wrong is not sufficient to guarantee that children will act on what they have been taught is moral.

Page 175 ó Adults intend to supply Christian instruction, fun, and opportunities for children to build relationships in the church family, but little attention is given to worship, even in what is called children's worship. We often try to compete with the rapid paced entertainment of television, seldom giving children a quiet moment in which to meet God, and many children lose touch with the God for whom their hearts hunger.

Page 176 ó When all are seated in the circle I say, "This is a special place. It is a very special place because we have come here to be with God ó to listen to God, to talk to God, and to hear the stories of God. In this place we walk more slowly and we talk more softly, because someone may be listening to God, and we don't want to disturb them. We need a way to get ready to be in this special place with God. You don't need me to tell you how to get ready; you can do it yourself, because quiet comes from the inside. Let's all close our eyes and take just a moment to relax and get quiet from the inside."

After a few quiet moments I continue, "We can't see Jesus with our eyes, can we? But in our imaginations we can see him. Do you see Jesus coming into our room? He walks over and sits down right beside you. Now is your time to tell Him anything you want to tell Him."

One morning during this quiet time, as I silently prayed for each child in the circle, I looked up to see who I might have missed. To my amazement, every child, with eyes tightly closed, was intently focused on this time of communion with Jesus. After a few minutes I close our time of prayer with a short expression of thanksgiving, "Thank you, Jesus, for being with us and loving us. Amen."

"We talk to God when we pray, and when we sing," I remind the children.