

DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Volume 6 | Issue 2

Article 4

2020

Book Review: Bridging Theory and Practice in Children's Spirituality

Shannon Rains

Lubbock Christian University, shannon.rains@lcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Rains, Shannon (2020) "Book Review: Bridging Theory and Practice in Children's Spirituality," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol6/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ ACU.

DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Book Review

Bridging Theory and Practice in Children's Spirituality: New Directions of Education, Ministry, and Discipleship, edited by Mimi L. Larson and Robert J. Keeley. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020. 264 pages, \$22.99.

Reviewer: Shannon Rains

The sixth gathering of the Children's Spirituality Summit (formerly the Children's Spirituality Conference) was held at Lipscomb University in 2018. Founded in 2003, the conference continues to shape the emerging study of children's spirituality through presentations, conversations, and the publication of research. Editors Mimi L. Larson and Robert J. Keeley have compiled papers from the most recent conference into *Bridging Theory and Practice in Children's Spirituality*, an accessible book for scholars, practitioners, and church leaders. The contributed essays provide a foundation for the study of children's spiritual formation before engaging difficult topics such as racial diversity, disabilities, loss, grief, and trauma. The five sections of Larson's and Keeley's carefully constructed book lay a foundation for children's spirituality, consider the environments that cultivate children's spirituality, reflect on the importance of story in shaping children's spirituality, describe methods for nurturing children's spiritual development, and contemplate future research of children's spirituality. Each chapter also includes the authors' practical suggestions for implementing their research.

Section 1 describes the foundations of children's spirituality. In chapter 1, Scottie May traces the study of children's spiritual formation over the last seventy-five years. Three common micro-metaphors describe children's spiritual formation, ministry *to*, *for*, and *with* children. She also proposes that adults can be spiritually formed *by* children, a theme repeated throughout the book (37). In chapter 2, Kevin E. Larson and Adam Harwood present a brief overview and comparison of the five theological views of children: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed,

and Baptist. While each tradition is significantly different, Larson and Harwood identify ten areas of agreement across all five traditions. This chapter serves to unify the discussion of children's spirituality within Christianity. Next, Karen F. Williams contributes one of the most challenging chapters in this book, a call for the church to address racial diversity and justice in the church. She says

Too often, the praxis of racial justice is missing, making racial diversity incomplete. And racial diversity becomes empty words when the evils of racism have not been denounced. Faith communities and organizations can tout being racially diverse but still have systems of racial oppression. As such, placing children in racially diverse settings devoid of racial justice engenders an environment of oppression, racism, and microaggressions (62-63).

This theme is further discussed in Henry Zonio's research in chapter 13. In the final chapter in this section Erik W. Carter addresses children with disabilities, urging the church to practice radical hospitality and embrace all children in belonging.

The next four chapters consider the environment that spiritually forms children. First, John Roberto explores the three faith forming environments that nurture children's maturing faith: the faith community, the family, and the age group, while providing ministers with a helpful tool to assess their ministry (89). In chapter 6, Trevecca Okholm reimagines the faith community and the family, calling for a paradigm shift away from a focus on the nuclear family and instead embracing the concept of *familying* one another. *Familying* creates space for a community of belonging within all generations by putting emphasis on the process of belonging to one another instead of developing more programs to meet the needs of the nuclear family (103). Belonging, also a key theme discussed in chapters 7 and 8, is essential for resiliency in the face of grief, loss and trauma. Practically, belonging is cultivated when adults journey with children in grief, loss, and trauma, listen to their stories, provide them with emotionally safe places, and help them identify spiritual hope.

Section 3 continues with the theme of belonging; children belong to God's unfolding story in Scripture. Marva Hoopes believes that "God uses story to get to the heart of his creation" (160), therefore it is our God-given responsibility to teach children Scripture. While that may be so, Scripture includes many hard stories that are not child friendly. Thus, it is tempting

to sanitize Scripture for the ears of children. Keeley believes that it is of vital importance that we tell the hard stories to children. In chapter 10, he asserts that good theology is found in difficult stories. He warns against studying the characters of the story to use them as “moral examples” that teach a “lesson from their lives that we can emulate or avoid in our own life” (167). Instead, teachers should ask children “what is God doing in this story?” (167). Similarly, in the next chapter, Dana Kennamer suggests that children should be encouraged to wonder about God in Scripture and warns that some popular teaching methodologies can actually distract children from being drawn into the narrative. Instead, children are empowered by the Holy Spirit to make meaning of the story on their own terms as little theologians, perhaps even leading adults to a new understanding of a familiar story.

Children’s ministry curricula resources often enable storytelling in churches. Chapters 12 and 13 present two research projects that question the quality of these resources. First, Larson asks a hard question (179), “Does the church care if children can think?” To answer her question, Larson uses Bloom’s taxonomy to assess curricula for activities that support higher ordered thinking. After reviewing a variety of resources, she finds that “over 93% of all activities in children’s ministry curriculum landed in the lower levels of thinking” (194). Then in chapter 13, Zonio reviews the illustrations and pictures in curricula and finds “predominantly white pictorial depictions of Bible stories, overwhelmingly white representations of church, and multiculturalism as diversity” (204). This leads to “a symbolic isolation of whites from people of color” that contributes to “silence when it comes to race and racial issues in the lessons” (213). In each case, higher quality resources that attend to issues beyond knowledge acquisition would go far in maturing the discipleship of children. Finally, chapters 14 and 15 round out the section with Lacy Finn Borgo discussing the role of spiritual direction with children, and Larson and Shirley Morgenthaler advocating for the importance of play in children’s spiritual formation.

So, what does the future hold for the study of children’s spirituality? Larson and Keely conclude *Bridging Theory and Practice in Children’s Spirituality* calling for a continued and future emphasis on ministry *with* and *by* children within the family and faith community, supported by intergenerational ministry, and aided by a greater understanding of the needs of Generation Z. This vision will require uncomfortable conversations as leaders challenge a system they have found to be flawed while many still believe existing systems nurture children’s spirituality.

Church leaders need to deal with racial inequalities in children's ministry as well humbly meet children in the beauty and the messiness of their lives. To do so, scholars and practitioners need to equip themselves with thoughtful research.

There is no doubt that this book should be used to equip leadership teams in churches and ministry students in our academic institutions. I am hopeful that this book will inspire more scholar/practitioners to embrace research in children's spirituality.

Shannon Rains (DMin, Abilene Christian University) is the Assistant Professor of Children's Ministry at Lubbock Christian University. Before her appointment, she served in children's and family ministry for fifteen years. Dr. Rains lives in Lubbock, Texas, with her husband David and their children River (2003) and Reese (2009).