

A Note from the Guest Editor

The thematic focus of this issue of *Sacred Spaces* is pastoral care and counseling with children. Once in a blue moon, I get to teach a course on that subject, though I think about it continually and understand its centrality for good ministry, having worked for many years in clinical and ecclesial settings with children. The course's relative infrequency is due in part to the belief by many seminary students that courses involving children as subject foci are more "ancillary" than other courses. The reason I keep offering it is that (1) children matter; (2) I believe there are some particular perspectives, knowledge, and skills that can enable better pastoral care and counseling with children; and (3) good ministries of care with children support the well-being of the whole people of God.

One of my mentors in pastoral care and counseling, Ed Dobihal, once said to me on the subject of pastoral care with children that the Christian gospels do not so much communicate a different way of thinking about *care* as they offer a different way of thinking about the subjects of care, the *children*. In the gospel narratives, children are brought into the middle of the action, even in the face of strong willed adults who would rather turn them away. Children are important subjects of healing narratives. They are also agents of care, as when, for example, a child offers up loaves and fishes that then feed a multitude. My own practical theology of childhood (Mercer, 2005) takes to heart this focus on thinking differently about children as I address them as agents, fully human subjects of their own stories, and part of the purposes of God--in short, as they ones we need to welcome because through them we welcome God.

While I believe my former teacher was right that we are called in faith to re-consider children and childhood, I suggest that doing so nearly always requires us to think differently about care as well. In a somewhat unconventional approach to the topic of pastoral care with

children, this issue of *Sacred Spaces* gathers together six essays inviting us to reconsider some ways we may think about children and their care. The group of authors hails from diverse locations in terms of academic disciplines and practice contexts. Among them are pastoral theologians, a religious educator, a priest-psychiatrist, a CPE supervisor and disabilities advocate, and a practical theologian who claims as his primary credential for this essay his status as a grandfather. These essays do not offer any sort of manual for “how to” offer pastoral care and counseling with children, although in their perspectives on faith, children, and care they provide pictures of what such care might involve. Nor do these essays provide an explicit catalogue of best practices, though the discerning eye will find many such practices imbedded in the writings. Instead, this collection of essays offers a multitude of ways to imagine children and care toward more fully and faithfully accompany children in various contexts of ministry.

Bonnie Miller McLemore teaches pastoral theology at Vanderbilt University. Her essay provides a tour through an important, emerging body of literature about which pastoral counselors and other pastoral caregivers may not be aware, the literature of childhood studies and religion. As Miller McLemore introduces this important literature, she suggests that the literature of childhood studies and religion is particularly important for pastoral counselors, first, because of the advances it makes in emphasizing children’s agency. Second, Miller McLemore underscores, pastoral caregivers ought to be aware of the shift in thought about children’s faith formation. She provides a helpful overview of how recent conversations on the formative power of practices influence how we might understand and support the religious lives of children.

Bill Gaventa, a clinical pastoral education supervisor and advocate for persons with disabilities, offers a broad framework for thinking about disability and the persons who live with them, before providing concrete suggestions for pastoral caregivers working with children with

disabilities and their families. Gaventa challenges pastoral caregivers to recognize “able-ist” assumptions that may limit how, where, and why children with disabilities access pastoral care resources. He also offers specific resources for persons providing pastoral care and counseling to children.

Mary Lynn Dell is an Episcopal priest and a child and adolescent psychiatrist. Her essay invites readers to accompany her through a day in her work in a children’s hospital, in which her theological reflection forms a key frame for the kind of care she provides her patients as a physician. Dell’s article focuses specifically on violence in children’s experiences. She invites pastoral caregivers to recognize the severity of medical and psychiatric injury present in the acute presentation (in a hospital setting) of children affected by violence, that may be more hidden at the time of a pastoral encounters.

Katherine Turpin teaches religious education at Ilif School of Theology in Denver, CO, where she also serves as associate dean for curriculum and assessment. Turpin, a seasoned practitioner of ministry particularly with children and youth, focuses her essay on the “later end of childhood,” the middle school aged younger adolescent. Specifically, she wonders why so many adults seem to dislike this age group? Exploring the relative instability of the self among children in this age group and the challenges this creates for adults trying to relate to them, Turpin raises concerns about the potentially widespread absence of support that is critical to identity- and faith-formation of these young people. Her discussion about the shifting performances of self by middle school youth, and the resulting difficulty this poses for adults trying to relate to them, is of critical significance for pastoral counselors who may be asking children in this age group to narrate and perform a more stable self than is possible at this time.

Donald Capps teaches at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he has been thinking and writing about the uses of humor in human experience. How do children use humor? A friend of mine who teaches in elementary education claims that she can tell the age of a child by the kinds of jokes that child tells and/or enjoys. “Oh, you are in the ‘knock-knock’ joke phase, “ she once said sympathetically when I told her what my dinner table conversations sounded like. “Don’t worry, it won’t last for ever.” What comes after that, I wondered? “Potty jokes,” she said, “And that usually lasts quite a while.” Capps’ essay brings to our attention a lesser-known work of Freud on jokes. Freud held that jokes allow human beings to manage the affective stress of living in civilized societies which require us to live beyond the psychological resources we actually possess. With this in mind, Capps looks at the psychological function of jokes for children as they move into and deal with the demands of life under Freud’s Reality Principle. Capps’ study has significant implications for pastoral care with children, both in terms of how we hear children’s jokes, and how we use humor with children as a mode of care.

The final essay of this issue of Sacred Spaces comes from Herbert Anderson, a veteran pastoral and practical theologian who often includes attention to children in his pastoral care writings even when children are not the explicit foci at hand. Anderson’s essay is reprinted here (with permission) from *The New Theological Review*, offering a classic look at how children’s minds work through a brief exploration in children’s literature. Like Capps’ examination of children and jokes, Anderson also addresses humor, in this case the humorous language of Theodore Geisel, who is better known to most of us as Dr. Seuss. What makes these children’s books so compelling, asks Anderson? He considers the play of language in Seuss’s books, drawing parallels between the delight in the sounds of words and the stories these books narrate with a number of important theological characteristics of childhood. Such connections go a long

way to helping pastoral counselors and caregivers offer good care with children, because they offer important perspectives on how children think, use language, and view the world.

I have appreciated this opportunity to work with each of the authors in this volume, as well as with the journal's editor Ryan LaMothe, whose guidance and skill has been a gift to me.

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Sources:

Mercer, Joyce Ann. *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005.