

**Be Kind/Be Seen/Become Wise**

A Practical Theology of Ministry for Assisting 8-10 Year-Olds

In Claiming and Living Their Christian Heritage

by

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KSW A motto for effective youth ministry: Be **K**ind, Be **S**een, Become **W**ise

MTD Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

## CHAPTER ONE

### Life Today

Life on Earth isn't easy.

As Solomon told us, there is nothing new under the sun. However, *the way life presents itself to us* changes over time and *our ministries must change over time*. This paper exposes the way life is presenting itself to 8-10 year-olds, explores the reasons for this reality, looks at how we should be ministering to this age group, and, finally, gives a practical strategy for this ministry, namely: Be Kind, Be Seen, Become Wise (KSW).

What kind of world does the 8-10 year old experience today and where is God in this experience? We know God is not welcome at public schools, so children are taught God is not *there*. Why should children think God matters? They (and we) live in a world where the notions of a “right” vs. a “wrong” have become relative. My right is what is right for *me* and it doesn't have anything to do with what is right for *you*.

What about the community these young people are part of? Yes, they most likely have a family, and in more than 3 instances out of four they daily live around and see (many) other people, but it too often is not a community in the true sense of the word. There are too many invisible walls – mostly intolerance - which deflect communication and hinder authentic community. Children see many adults who don't have it figured

out. Say Mahan, Warren, and White, "...young people are frightened when they consider the condition of the world and their future. Will the world be destroyed by nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons? Why is there so much global injustice? Who is paying attention to these matters?"<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Johnson sees the "the peculiar neglect of God the Holy Spirit in Western Christianity" to be another tragic result of hierarchal dualism, in that the concept supports a separation of God and the earth just as she says it (hierarchical dualism) separates men and the rest of creation. The false reasoning here is in that the Spirit and God are removed from the earth and that nature's worth, according to this viewpoint, is solely in how it can assist in everything man views as progress.<sup>2</sup>

How does a child feel in this kind of world? He tries to follow his instinct that there is some pattern to life, but outside influences (or the lack thereof) prevent him from having his real needs met. He grows away from himself and his relationship with the created world. Although quality intergenerational and intercultural experience would help deflate this balloon and loosen this rope, it is not always that easy to come by. She many have an expansive online community and may be the fastest texter or tweeter with the most friends, but does she have an *offline* community?

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<sup>1</sup> Mahan, Warren, & White, *Awakening Youth Discipleship*, (Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books), 49

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, (New York: Paulist Press), 1993

If the child lives in a large city, Ronald E. Peters says his world can be defined in three words: *alienation, fear, and violence*.<sup>3</sup> There is little room for loving, caring community in the swirl of these emotions.

We are lacking in effective programs for youth.

Where are the principals of KSW? Is there *kindness* in a world of confusion and isolation? Is there *safety*? Is there time and space to grow in *wisdom*?

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald E. Peters, *Urban Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 200

## CHAPTER 2 Why Is Life This Way?

The list goes on....

Kendra Creasy Dean can sum up today's reality in three words: *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism* (MTD) - a parasite which gives us a false sense of knowing, has no need for hope, considers the holy spirit dispensable, and is fed by absent parents and lost adult Christians. Further, it a persuasive dominant culture which subverts alternative world views, and replaces relationships with results.<sup>4</sup>

Consider Deuteronomy 20:19: "If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy the trees by wielding an ax against them..."<sup>5</sup> Substituting the terms *divorce* for *war* and *children of divorce* for *trees* gives us an eerie analogy.

Life today includes the racism and sexism we've inherited and struggled with for millenniums: In the Bible, approximately 3100 names appear and only 170 of them are women.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kendra Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14,29,39,82,&104.

<sup>5</sup> Michael D. Coogan, Editor, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) , 283

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Wilson Davison, *Preaching Women of the Bible*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 8

Further, consider what David W. Orr says about our relationship with the created world:

“Oil has undermined intelligence because it requires technologies that we are smart enough to build but not smart enough to use safely. This is the gap between knowing how to do something and knowing what one should do.....The idea of cheap citizenship is founded on the theology of the lottery: that one does not reap what one sows.... What we call(ed) “modernization” represented dramatic changes in how we regard the natural world and our role in it. These changes are now so thoroughly ingrained in us that we can scarcely conceive of any other manner of thinking.<sup>7</sup>

Refer to Habbakuk: God used the nations to punish (sinful and unrepentant) Judah and Israel. But the powerful nations continued in arrogance and the oracles against the nations successfully predicted their unconditional downfall. “One might notice as U.S. readers, we are not positioned as the needful, hopeful Jews of this oracle, but as participants in and beneficiaries of a self-serving system.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> David W. Orr, , *Earth in Mind*, (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2004), 57,124,&133

<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann *Isaiah 1–39*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998),

Adding to the list, Bible studies for children generally do not speak to children as *already agents* for God, but rather as unfinished products. But children *know* God. As Richard Nysse so eloquently said, “The Bible as scripture seeks to shape the present, not simply inform the reader regarding the past.” Helping children shape the present with the Holy Spirit demands a respect their *already agency*. Seeing God *with us now in the theology of the cross* is a more holistic approach to Bible study than a static regurgitation of Bible stories. “For young people credibility comes in the form of a person who ‘gets it’ – someone whose concern for the adolescent’s well-being translates into sympathy for her world view, validation of her interests, and acknowledgement of her struggles.”<sup>9</sup> Nancy Going has said, “We can’t always make things easier, but we can walk alongside.” We live in a world of quick fixes. Do children walk away from a youth ministry experience feeling truthfully connected? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “...the church’s task is not the conquest of young people, but the teaching of the Gospel.”<sup>10</sup>

Often, children are separated from worship. If we relegate children away from the worship service, how will they *learn* to worship, and how will adults *not learn* how to be uncomfortable around children during worship?

As previously mentioned, some children have a vast online community, but no offline community. Within one week, I attended two workshops where, in one, technology was touted as, “God’s plan to keep humans connected,” while, in the other,

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<sup>9</sup> K.C. Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for A Passionate Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 180

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1965-1974), 44

technology was called, “the force that separates people.” We have a responsibility to foster the former definition.

We do not have effective programs for matching volunteer skills. As K.C. Dean has said, “Youth will not leave the shallow end of the pool unless we do. We cannot give them what we do not have.”<sup>11</sup> We need effective ways to match our volunteers’ strengths with the world’s deep needs. Discernment is not easy. We must always ask ourselves what truths we embody and what values we represent. *What is God telling us?* Eremites make great mentors. *All* people are empowered with gifts of the Holy Spirit. Children need know adults with strong faith so that they can trust what they are told about God, grow in their identity in Christ, and serve the Lord out of their own gifts.

God gave us hearing for understanding and eyes for perceiving but, as God told Isaiah, (6:10), when we do not live the life we were made for, our ears will be made dull and our eyes will be closed. Says Miroslav Volf, “Our eyes and ears need a heart ready to receive the truth of God’s reality rather than one that longs for the comforts of false Gods.”<sup>12</sup> Being kind, being seen, and becoming wise (KSW) are tough goals on this landscape. Is it *kind* to discriminate on the basis of race/sex/sexual orientation? Are we being seen if *results* of life, amidst MTD, are more important than *relationships*? Is it *wise* to do something just because we can, without thinking about moral consequences?

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<sup>11</sup> K.C. Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for A Passionate Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 174

<sup>12</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 23

### CHAPTER 3 WHERE IS GOD SEEN IN THE LIFE OF 8-10 YEAR OLDS?

The first of the thirty-four characteristics of maturing Christian youth, listed by *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* study<sup>13</sup> is that these youth *seek spiritual growth* and that they *accept opportunities for learning how to speak naturally and intelligently about their faith*. The Spirit is a gift to us, all of us, including children. It lives with us, and is not forever elusive. The Spirit ought to be sought and received with confidence.

It's not just kind, but also necessary to talk with children about their faith. The youth I worked with under the KSW umbrella were quite attentive when asked about their faith: Thinking about God causes one 9 year-old girl to think about "death, because a lot of people have died in my family." A 10 year-old boy told me that God had been "really working" in his life, that he no longer "got in trouble at school" and that his "grades were better" and that he had been determined to be, even though only ten years-old, "mature enough to be in the youth group" at his church. He said this last with noticeable pride.

Says Catherine Doherty <sup>14</sup>:

I remember a child who was brought to view the body of

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<sup>13</sup> Martinson, Black, & Roberto, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, (St Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), 39

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Doherty, *Poustinia*, (Combermere ON: Madonna House Classics, 1993), 76

his grandmother. He sort of waltzed up to the coffin, kissed his grandmother, patted her on the head, and said, “Oh you’re so cold. Don’t worry, soon you’ll be very, very warm. Everything is going to be warm.” Somebody asked him (this was in Russia), why he said such a thing. “Oh, he said, my mother told me that Grandma was going to Jesus. It’s very cold on the way but very warm when you get there.” Now that’s the simplicity of a child.

Children who are encouraged in creativity develop confidence in their natural gifts. Those with artistic interest can grow in spirituality when they are supported in these gifts.

God can be seen in children’s awe of creation. Biophilia is the urge to affiliate with (care about) other forms of life; it is very much a part of the world of children. Outdoor Ministry can be a great supporter of creation care. Says David W. Orr, in the outdoors “we can develop the kind of first-hand knowledge of nature from which real intelligence grows. This means breaking down walls made by clocks, bells, rules, academic requirements, and a tired indoor pedagogy. I am proposing a jail break that would put learners of all ages outdoors more often.”<sup>15</sup>

Bodies and minds need exercise and good nutrition to thrive. The 8-10 year olds’ brains are about to kick into a neuron growth frenzy that will end at puberty. Their

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<sup>15</sup> David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind*, (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2004), 52

temporal lobes, responsible for among other things, emotional interpretation, are still underdeveloped and so is their pre-frontal cortex, the decision making center of the brain.

I come back to KSW: *Kindness* is supporting children in their growth, accepting and encouraging them for who they are. It means leaving plenty of room for disagreement without the need to dehumanize. Children will more likely be *seen* if they are not afraid to be themselves for lack of acceptance. As they learn it is safe to be seen, they are learning to discern where they stop and the other begins, and to respect themselves and others. To strive to love our neighbors (and children are our neighbors) is to grow in *wisdom*.

## CHAPTER 4 USING OUR GOD-GIVEN AGENCY

Considering the state of affairs in the world, I developed the theme KSW for working with the youth in the after-school program I direct. *Kindness* is essential to fostering community, *being seen* is essential to safety, and *growing wise* (vs. being clever) helps us to accept and forgive the mistakes we and others will inevitable make in life.

Children who attend public schools spend one third of their days in a place where God is not spoken of. As a full-time science teacher in public schools for ten years, I didn't used to think that this was a big deal: they were in the class to learn about science, not God. Is this *wise*? Now, I think about the 6<sup>th</sup> grade girl who, during a movie of an imagined filming of evolution over time, suddenly shouted, "I believe in God!" (I'm proud to say I blurted back, "So do I!") I also think of a relatively heated argument between two 2nd graders about God. One, in angry frustration, told me, "*He* said God is here! God is *up there*." (Again, I'm proud to say, I said "God is everywhere.") In both situations, the children seemed satisfied. Not allowing children to express themselves about God is not *wise*.

God is community. We participate in honoring creation. It is kind to be responsible (and wise) stewards of the earth. I think people who hotly contest the notion of global warming are devil's advocates. David Orr makes a profound statement in this regard:

If it turns out that global warming would have been severe and we forestalled it by becoming more energy efficient, and making a successful transition to renewable energy, we will have avoided disaster. If, however, it turns out that factors as yet unknown minimized the severity and impact of warming while we became more energy efficient in the belief that it might be otherwise, we will not have saved the planet, but we will have reduced acid rain, improved air quality, decreased oil spills, reduced the amount of strip mining, reduced our dependence on imported oil.....If we gain, we gain all, if we “lose” we still gain a great deal.”<sup>16</sup>

The same can be said about accepting and responding wisely to the premise of MTD: even if it turned out to be false and we embrace community and nurture the idea that everyone has something to offer for the good of all, if we consider *the indispensability of the Holy Spirit*, if we embrace hope, if we become active advocates of effective parenting, if we teach the Bible and continue to grow in faith, and if we strive to build relationships with others, fostering community, and then, after all this, we find that MTD was not the threat we imagined it to be, “if we gain, we gain all, if we ‘lose,’ we still gain a great deal.”

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<sup>16</sup> David W. Orr, , *Earth in Mind*, (Washington, D.C.: Island Press), 85

In the after-school program where I work, using water colors and a large sheet canvas, students re-created pictures from Cynthia Grady's book, *I Lay My Stitches Down: Poems of American Slavery*.<sup>17</sup> One picture, by illustrator Michele Wood, depicts three boys fishing in a canoe. The text reads:

When enslaved children were still too young to work in the fields, they spent their days playing after the morning chores of slopping hogs or milking cows, sweeping or gardening. They often played with children in the master's family. Before American Indians were "removed" to reservations by the U.S. government, they often lived near plantation communities in varying degrees of friendship and cooperation with slaves and slaveholders.

This is God in the life of 8-10 year olds. What would *not* be happening in their parents' lives is *natural* for them, and I'd like to believe experiences like this could and did occur.

The Exemplary Youth Ministry Study found one of the congregational qualities of an exemplary youth ministry is that of making youth and ministry with young people a high priority.<sup>18</sup> The church where the after-school program is held is planting a

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<sup>17</sup> Cynthia Grady, *I Lay My Stitches Down*, (Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmanns Books for Young Readers, 2012), not paginated

<sup>18</sup> Martinson, Black, and Roberto, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), 252

community garden and the students will have a plot. This project (including the student plot) is being supervised by church member - “Dave,” who is very enthusiastic about working with the children and told me emphatically that he wants to be known as “The Science Guy.” They are going to plant radishes, carrots, and beans and Dave is already making plans for the vegetables that will go home with the children. Carole, another church member, has enthusiastically shared her origami skills with the children. So far, they’ve made butterflies and beetles.

McClendon, in *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, says he would like to see the abolition of the concept of “the laity,” to be replaced with the concept of “the discipleship.”<sup>19</sup> I agree; Dave and Carole are disciples.

Some of the children in the program speak Spanish and Hmong and we have had some introductory lessons in both languages. One adult volunteer, who enjoys working one-on-one with the children, contacted one girl’s Hmong parents about mentoring her in reading this summer.

I recently took Paul Hultgren’s study on *The Book of Romans* and gleaned some refreshing new information. For example, consider Romans 16:7: Paul says, “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent

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<sup>19</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic),

among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.”<sup>20</sup> There is little disagreement in recent scholarship that *Junia (a female) was an apostle*. (Three good resources regarding this are *Junia*, by Eldon Epp, Linda Belleville, and The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 2010.) The name Junias, the male version of Junia, does not appear in ancient manuscripts and over 350 instances of the name Junia have been cited. Bible teachers who are sensitive to what the word can teach us about racism and sexism are to be valued. Says Lisa Wilson Davison,

Changes must be made in bible studies and church school curriculum to give equal attention and respect to the female characters of the biblical story. Children must be taught the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Deborah, Ruth, and Esther alongside those of Abraham, Issac, Gideon, David, and Solomon.<sup>21</sup>

Says Karen Marie Yust about 8-10 year olds: “They ideally interact with a religious community that welcomes their questions and their ongoing exploration of the provisional answers they find.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Michael D. Coogan, Editor, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) , 1997

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Wilson Davison, *Preaching Women of the Bible*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 3

<sup>22</sup> Karen Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 131

In one-on-one work I've been doing with a 5<sup>th</sup> grader, she has produced a single canvas oil painting version of the Bible. Over a ten week period, I adapted Craig Koester's Genesis to Revelation class to a fourth grade level; after each lesson, she used a piece of the canvas to reflect her understanding.

After our first lesson, she decided to paint one of her favorite parts of creation – a manatee. She shared with me that her mother reminded her that God looked at creation and said, "It is good." Other parts of the painting includes Goliath , Paul in the mountains of Tarsus, and baby Jesus.

## Conclusion

This difficult life is a dance – between the promise and the challenge.

As youth leaders, one of our challenges is finding a balance between discernment and action. There are *so many* variables in our work with children and their lives. Robert Cole said, “I stop far short of large-scale generalizations about what does or does not happen to children with respect to their religious and spiritual life,”<sup>23</sup> and Andrew Root has poignantly said, “People are complicated, beautiful, and broken.”

I have found comfort and wisdom in the KSW method. Moltmann asks, “Who is Jesus?” and answers, “Simply, *the kingdom of God in person.*”<sup>24</sup> I continue to pray for wisdom and my help comes from God, and Jesus continues to “..take me with (Him), beyond the tears, beyond this cross, into new life.”<sup>25</sup>

It is *kind* to listen to others and help them to find their voice. It is kind and *wise* to help adults interested in the first third of life match their gifts for sharing. For all of us, including 8-10 year-olds, *being seen* means more than being safe. It means, as Kendra Dean has said, “being there, being moved, and being known.”<sup>26</sup> It means, as Andrew Root has said, being a teacher who is “willing to limp” so students are freed to share their

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 22

<sup>24</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 7

<sup>25</sup> William Burke, *Protect Us From All Anxiety* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1999), 13

<sup>26</sup> K.C. Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for A Passionate Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 143

*ex nihilo* and reconnect to life. It means wrestling with the now-infamous free will God has given us. It means being vulnerable and knowing that our strength is in Christ and that true intimacy requires a sense of self in order to *be known* in a relationship instead of devoured. It means learning to forgive so that we can be truly alive. We become ever become ever wiser as we walk Christ's path.

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