

SEEING GOD THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

BY VERLIE Y. F. WARD

Children are born with an infinite capacity to love, to learn, and to worship. I once thought that as a parent, teacher, and mentor, it was my role to model, to teach, and to direct learning. However, the longer I study children, the more convinced I become that the child and I come together before God. Both of us are learners—and in many cases, the child is my teacher. It seems that when I listen, wait, observe, and ask questions, I am better able to grow and learn with my students.

Children learn to walk and talk naturally in a nurturing environment. In a similar way, they grow in the Spirit. Children have an inborn awareness of God, a sense of wonder and awe that takes them into the presence of the Transcendent. When given the opportunity, they can penetrate beyond facts and symbols to discover the presence of unfailing love.

Perhaps it might be helpful to pause at this point and reflect on our own childhood spiritual environment. What pictures come to your mind as you recall your youthful experiences with God, the church, and religious education?

As I listen to college students speak about the God of their childhood, I often grieve over the images they bring to mind. Last week a student told me, "I could see God with the books and a red pencil making check marks beside my name every

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time I did something wrong." Not all young people have this picture, but many were introduced to a stern Judge, and as a result, developed a fearful relationship with their Maker.

Reflecting on my own childhood spiritual direction, I see that it focused mainly on knowing and doing. My picture of God was quite formal. I knew He loved me and that the Bible contained truths I could depend upon. My early spiritual life focused on knowing truth and doing what was right. Though important, this emphasis largely failed to include the quiet personal reflective part of worship, the waiting, the wonder, the receiving and responding to a loving God—that sense of the transcendent that gives meaning and purpose to life.

Is this learning to wait, to receive, and to give a personal response reserved for the mature Christian? My research has led me to conclude that even very young chil-

dren can enter into a deep, soul-filling relationship with God. If teachers and parents foster this concept, if children can reach beyond facts and become part of the biblical narrative, our young people will experience God in such a meaningful way that they will not abandon Him in later years.

The Child and the Adult Seek God Together

When the child and the adult come together as faithful students, sharing their deep inner hunger for God and drinking at the living stream, it is not uncommon for the child to be the

teacher knows when to keep silent, to wait on the threshold as God speaks to the child.

In 1906, Maria Montessori turned away from a brilliant career in science and medicine to become involved in a Normal School full of poverty-stricken children. She wrote, "I set to work like a peasant woman who, having set aside a good store of seed-corn, has found a fertile field in which she may sow it. But I was wrong. I had hardly turned over the clods of my field when I found gold. . .the clods concealed a precious treasure. I was not the peasant I had thought myself. Rather I was like foolish Aladdin, who, without knowing it, had in his hand a key that would open hidden treasures."¹ Like hers, our work with children will frequently offer surprises and unexpected rewards.

Understanding the spiritual needs of children and their mentors leads us to ask what environment will best invite this deeper connection with God.

While reading one of Diane Forsyth's *Charistis* newsletters,² I came across a reference to the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in Washington, D.C., which has an atrium for children's worship and reflection. In fact, worship places of this nature have been established in 29 states.

The Atrium

Historically, the Atrium was a place between the street and the church where individuals could prepare themselves to meet with God. Today, it is a place where children and their teachers can listen and hear the voice of God speaking to them. It is not so much a location for instruction, but more a place of Holy Ground where Christ is encountered in word and action.

At the Atrium, children are introduced to lessons from the Word of God and are offered materials that increase their spiritual understanding. These materials invite concentration and foster a sense of satisfaction and joy. Children are encouraged to interpret the lesson through prayer, movement, conversation, and art. This personal involvement invites not just memorization, but also internalization and application to the life of the child. An understanding of the indwelling presence

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teacher. Children have a profound sense of the majesty of God. This is reflected in the way they speak of Him—their sense of wonder and spontaneous joy.

Religious instruction is much more than sharing information, grace, and comfort. It is also sitting with children as they listen and respond to the voice of God. When we realize that we do not have to *instill* spirituality but simply *protect* and *nourish* the work of the Spirit within the child's heart, it makes our role much more

satisfying. We can then assume the role of the listener—open, receptive, and respectful of what the child understands about God. This kind of spiritual nurturing allows for the child's personal response, which in turn brings renewal to the adult.

Throughout this process, our faith must be deep enough to handle the many questions children ask and to recognize those times when it is wise to say, "I wonder about that, too; and together we will keep searching for answers." The wise

of Christ becomes foundational in the building of a moral, Christian character.

Recently, Diane Forsyth and I visited the Atrium at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Vancouver, Washington. The simplicity and natural beauty of this place surprised us. The building was rather like a courtyard with a series of developmentally appropriate rooms for different age groups attached to the church building. Each room was furnished with natural wood products. Plants and simple objects were artistically arranged. In the center of the courtyard, there was a garden plot where the children could plant flowers or just sit quietly.

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What impressed me most was the way children behaved when they entered the Atrium. They came into the room quietly, selected an activity, and became engaged with it. Some chose to cut and arrange flowers for the prayer table, while others worked with a miniature model of the city of Jerusalem. I overheard two little boys talking about the tomb of Christ. I asked them if He was still in there. They quickly replied, "Oh, didn't you know? He came out on Easter Sunday. He's gone to heaven—He's alive."

Children also worked with wooden models of Jesus' parables; water to wine at the wedding feast, the pearl of great price, and the Good Shepherd. In each area, materials were provided, the Scripture was read, and the adults presented lessons to help the children learn how to respond.

Children were invited to choose their own activities and work at their own rhythm. Initial instruction was brief and given to small groups or to the whole group. While engaged in independent activities, children appeared to be deeply absorbed and to reach beyond symbols to find meaning. The experience in the Atrium seemed to offer a deep sense of joy and peace for the children.

After reading more about these places, examining the careful research that has been done over 30 years, and visiting the Atrium, I began to ask myself the serious question, could I create a worshipful place in an educational setting for Adventist children? How could I foster this deep connection with God? Could these con-

A child creates music on the auto harp at the Atrium in the Church of the Good Shepherd in Vancouver, Washington.

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Small-group instruction at the Vancouver Atrium.

cepts be incorporated into the Methods in Religion course?

This past summer, Diane Forsyth piloted our first course on *The Spiritual Nurturing of the Child*. Because of a generous gift, we were able to establish a small model of an Atrium in the education building at Walla Walla College. It combines natural lightly stained wood furniture and wooden models of many of Christ's parables. (The Good Shepherd is the favorite.) There is a prayer corner for children and one for adults. Symbols of dedication, communion, and baptism are displayed in concrete ways. There are simple explanations that help children understand that they belong to God and are a part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church from birth. Often between classes, I will find college students in the Atrium playing hymns on the auto harp and finding moments of peace and joy in the midst of a busy day. This simple instrument can also be played and enjoyed by children. A rich assortment of devotional books invites quiet spiritual reflection.

What Takes Place in the Atrium

The Word of God is central. Each lesson begins with the biblical setting, describing how people lived and worked and worshiped. Then the story is read from the Word. The stories are simple and brief, leaving space for children to create their own pictures and to react. (This is in sharp contrast to the high-powered, frenetic images on the television screen with which they are familiar.) For too long, we have tried to compete with the child's surroundings. Wouldn't we be wiser to offer something that contrasts with what the world offers?

For young children, the central theme is the story of the Good Shepherd. An adult reads the story to them from the Scriptures,³ telling them that the Good Shepherd loves His sheep and takes good care of them. He knows each one by name. They ponder what it means to be the lost lamb, sought after by the Good Shepherd; what it is to be carried in the arms of the Good Shepherd, then taken to green pastures to be fed.⁴ They are

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given simple wooden models of a sheepfold, the Good Shepherd, and the sheep so they can re-create the story, which becomes a part of their lives.

After reading the Word

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Children prepare flowers for the prayer table at the Vancouver Atrium.

of God, the adult asks: "What might the lost sheep be thinking when he is cold and all alone? How would the other sheep feel if the shepherd came back without the lost lamb? What might the Shepherd say when, after long searching, He finds the lamb and lifts it onto His shoulders? How will the sheep feel when everyone is home safe and the gate is locked for the night?"

Materials used in the Atrium are simple, leaving space for the child's creativity. The Word is read over and over, with the conviction that it speaks for itself.

Children are respectfully invited to draw their own conclusions after encountering God. This simple, reflective approach has a profound effect.

Prayer

Everything that takes place in the Atrium is really a preparation for prayer. The richer the presentation of the Word, the more wonder and awe the child experiences and the more bountiful the response. Prayer is the most personal expression of one's relationship with God. No one can teach another to pray, but we seek to help children open their hearts to God as they listen and respond to the presence of love.

Research into children's prayers reveals that their sense of the transcendence of God and the nearness of His presence are very real. Until children are 7 or 8 years old, their prayers are predominantly words of thanksgiving and praise. Very often, it is the adult who teaches the young child the concept of petition. Children feel no need to ask because they know that "The Good Shepherd supplies my needs."

The prayer corner is a vital component of the Atrium. Here, children can respond to the lesson. Their prayers echo the theme studied from the Word. This corner

contains a small table, an open Bible with a picture of the lesson being studied, and a stand with phrase cards that encourage worship:

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runneth over."

"The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?"

"The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?"

Children will often sit or kneel in comfortable silence as they pray. Some children have been known to stay for more than an hour, leaving refreshed with a deep sense of gratitude and joy.

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Wonder

Wonder is natural to the child, the poet, and the artist. It is important to foster the capacity for wonder. Much of modern life is so animated and intense that children tend to lose their sense of surprise. The Atrium does not offer frequent or rapidly changing stimuli. This gives children time to dwell uninterrupted on lofty themes. Through continued, profound observation, children come to an awareness of the Infinite. They come to

The children's prayer table at the Vancouver Atrium.

understand the security of their place in God's transcendent salvation narrative. This awareness calls the child to live a life dominated by desire for God.

My Methods of Religion students' response to the Atrium has been gratifying. Many who came for a few moments of quiet found that they lingered for an hour or more and left renewed. They invited other students and worshiped together. Their journals reveal that they find the presence of God and connect with each other at a deeper level in this room. As for the children, they are awed by the wooden models of stories that they know and love. They want to hear again the familiar story and become the lost lamb tenderly rescued by the Shepherd. Parents who enter the Atrium ask themselves, "Where could we create a meaningful place of worship like this right in our own home?"

Vision for the Future

What do we hope to accomplish by establishing the Atrium? First, it is a model for teachers. For years, we have encouraged reading and writing centers. Now we are suggesting a worship and prayer space. I recently read of a classroom where

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A place for small-group instruction at the Walla Walla College Atrium.

the teacher had room for only a small rug, which she designated the "Worship Place." Children who needed quiet spiritual moments in the school day could go to the rug. While there, children learned to block out surrounding noise and enter into worshipful moments. Other students learned to respect the child on the rug by not engaging in conversation or attracting his or her attention in any way. Opportunities like this reinforce for children that God is not confined to certain times and places but is a part of their ongoing life.

It is my dream that every Christian educational facility will consider creating an Atrium, a central place of personal and group worship that reaches out to all students, parents, and teachers—a place where our students can discover that their lives are inextricably woven into the Bible narrative—a place for a lasting connection with the Transcendent. ✍

Verlie Y. F. Ward is Professor of Education at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington.

REFERENCES

1. Aline D. Wolf, *Nurturing the Spirit* (Hollidsburgh, Pa.: Parent Child Press, 1996), p. 28.
2. Diane Forsyth, *Charistis*, vol. VI, 1996.
3. John 10:1-18, Luke 15:3-7.
4. Sofia Cavaletti, Patricia Coulter, Gianna Gobbi, and Silvana Q. Montanaro, *The Good Shepherd and the Child* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: 1994).

Materials used in the Atrium are simple, leaving space for the child's creativity.

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The adult worship corner at the WWC Atrium.

The prayer table at the WWC Atrium, where children are invited to respond to God.

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Children use wooden models to re-enact the story of the Good Shepherd.