Holy Work with Children: Making Meaning Together

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Holy Work with Children: Making Meaning Together is the culmination of personal experience and qualitative research by Campen (2021), children's ministry pastor and director of the Discipleship of the Rio Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church in San Antonio, Texas. Although her research is set in the context of the church rather than school, this book is also highly relevant for Christian teachers in Christian early learning centres and schools who desire to connect their students with God in personal ways. The book is well supported by references throughout, has an extensive bibliography, and for those interested in how the data was collected there is an appendix outlining the research methodology.

While the literature in the area of children's spirituality has been growing, this book is focused entirely on the kinds of spiritual conversations that adults initiate with children. The main premise of this book is that conversations about God are most effective when adults talk with children rather than at children. The early chapters focus on providing context, exploring how children reflect on religious issues, and acknowledging the impact of community on religious experiences. Campen then espouses children as theologians, seeking to offer an inclusive theology that advocates for children to experience God in authentic ways.

Having established the importance of respect for the child and the inherent dangers of persuasion or coercion in spiritual questing, the remainder of the book draws on the author's research to identify the characteristics of 'Holy Conversations'. Campen begins with the notion of creating safe spaces for conversations through intentional prayer and building authentic relationships with students. She then proposes that the keys to having meaningful conversations include active wondering, opportunities for silence, modeling theological reflection, and active listening.

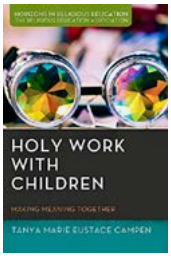
Chapter Four deals with the concept of Holy Conversations with God and elaborates on four phases that together help form a child's theological beliefs and actions. These phases are presented as verbs – engage, recognize, claim and respond – to indicate the active component they play in a child's spiritual life. No book on this topic would be complete without a toolbox for teachers and in the fifth chapter, Campen describes a variety of tools ranging from story, liturgy, and ritual to memory markers such as objects and symbols. She also includes the role of wonder, community, and involvement in the life of the church. Each tool is defined, explained, and illustrated.

The final chapter is called 'Faithful Praxis'. This chapter, although in essence, a summary of information already provided, is presented as a challenge to religious education teachers to be faithful to their calling.

This book is a balanced blend of theory and practice, challenge and affirmation. I frequently found myself reflecting on how I do 'Holy Conversations' with children. I highly recommend this book to parents, teachers, and anyone involved in children's ministries who desires to be more effective in helping children experience God in their lives. TEACH

"It was a normal Sunday morning. The children's minister at a United Methodist Church, I was scurrying around making sure everything was ready for the morning ministries. As I raced up the stairs to check the copy machine, I saw a family (Mum, Dad, Son) standing in the hallway looking slightly lost. I slowed my pace, walked up to the family and introduced myself. The parents looked at each other, then at their son, and finally me. The Mom took a deep breath and said: "He has a question for you" (motioning to their son). I quickly got down to eye level with the young child and said: "Hi, I'm Tanya, I'm the pastor for children at this church. I am so glad you're here. Do you have a question for me?" The child looked at the ground, shuffled his feet, and asked, "How do I know I believe in God?"

Chapter 1, Para. 1 (emphasis supplied)



> *"conversations about God are most effective when adults talk with children rather than at children."*