

Why Should We Care About Children's and Adolescent Books in the Church?

We are "people of the Book." That's a familiar phrase to most Christians, particularly to Presbyterians like us (Becky and Pamela). Of course, in the phrase, "the Book" refers specifically to the Bible – we Christians are people whose identities and lives are shaped by the book we call the Bible.

We believe that passionately – we are people of THE BOOK. But we also believe that other stories and other books can and should be used in the church, in order to help us more fully understand and weave "The Book" (Bible) into our lives of faith. In other words, we think it is not only appropriate but also important to weave stories from children's books like Janell Cannon's *Stellaluna*, and contemporary adolescent fiction like Joyce Carol Oates' *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*, into our educational ministry with all ages in the church.

Why? Why do we use books in addition to the Bible? Why do we think children's and adolescent literature is appropriate and even important to use? Why????

The argument on which we base our seminary course and this website on using children's and adolescent literature in the church runs something like this:

- Human beings are storytellers. To be human, to have identity as a human being, is to be a "storied" being. We are the creatures who know "who we are" and communicate "who we are" through telling stories. Our identity is "storied," we say. This is true of human being and identity in general, but that means it also extends to our identity and lives as persons of faith, as Christians. Our identity as people of faith is known through, carried in, communicated by, and expressed as story. Basically, stories are indispensable to us as humans.
- We relate our human experience to God's presence and ways through stories. Our argument runs deeper and more specific than simply the generic "human beings are storied.". We believe that the core way we humans know and relate to God is through stories. We are "people of the Book," people of the Bible in which stories show us our God, stories tell us what our God is like, stories communicate God's intentions for humanity and all creation, and stories rehearse the ongoing redemptive ways of God with us and our world. To be Christian is to be a storied people, rooted in the Story of scripture.
- "Christian education should be rightly understood as a storied process" – Anne Streaty Wimberly, describing her understanding and process of Christian education in her book, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*. Because we are storied creatures and because our specific identity as people of faith in this God is rooted in The Story, we

understand our work in the church's educational ministry to be a work of communicating The Story, helping people of all ages come to know The Story, assisting them in connecting their own identity stories and that Biblical Story, and challenging them to find meaning for their lives as they learn, work with, and interpret all these stories together.

Thus, for us, human being, the Christian faith, and the field of educational ministries are all intimately connected to "stories." We believe that this deep "storied" identity can best be enacted, embodied, deepened, challenged, and embraced, by helping people weave together the stories of the Christian faith and stories from other sources that help them express their questions, challenges, and experiences. The process of "story-linking" or "story-weaving" lies at the heart of educational ministry for us – the process of helping them connect the stories of their own lives and the Story of our faith. This linking or weaving can be fostered by using many different "stories" that embody what people experience, know and feel. These stories, when connected to our stories of Christian faith, can help to connect people of all ages more closely, fully, and deeply to the Christian Story.

We are NOT about substituting children's picture books, adolescent novels, books of poetry, contemporary autobiographies, or popular fantasy literature for serious engagement with the stories of the Christian faith as found in scripture and explicated in our theology.

We ARE about helping people connect the stories of the Bible and Christian theology TO their own storied identities and lives, by using the stories in good children's and adolescent literature as connecting points.

What does this mean??? What does this kind of "story-linking" look like? This website contains material to help you investigate, step inside, experience, and imagine what a story-linking process might include in our congregations, programs, and homes. Here you will find articles and essays about children's and adolescent literature (for example, "What are Literature Circles and How Can I Use Them in the Church?", "Using Books in Bibliotherapy with Troubled Children," "Doing Theology with Fantasy Literature," etc.) and ways to engage them in a story-linking kind of educational ministry. You will find "Faith Reviews" of a wide range of children's and adolescent books you might use in such story-linking. You will find lesson plans built around children's or adolescent literature, for use in structured educational settings (like Sunday School, Vacation Church Camp, youth groups, literature circles, parenting groups, etc.) . And you will find a place in which you can ask question, suggest books, and raise ideas for educational ministry that engages children's and adolescent literature.

Materials on this site will be updated and added-to regularly, as we (professors and our students) engage in our ongoing study of the field of “Using Children’s and Adolescent Literature” in the church’s educational ministry. Welcome!