

Nelson Cowan. *Let the Children Lead: Models for Worship with All Generations*. Abingdon Press, 2025. 95 pages. \$17.99.

In this theologically rich and pastorally sensitive book, Cowan invites us to shift away from a transactional approach to ministry with children that focuses on “institutional preservation” and to instead prioritize forming lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ (ix). *Let the Children Lead* is Christocentric, ecumenical, and practical.

Cowan understands the anxiety many feel about the decline of organized religion in the United States but cautions against the idolatry of numbers. He reminds us that children are “worshippers in their own right” (x) and not “numbers that ensure the survival of church institutions” (xii). Worship is not the domain of adults but “the work of all God’s people,” and Christ’s youngest disciples deserve agency in worship (13). Rather than recommending a separate service, Cowan offers five different models to help ministers empower children to participate and lead in intergenerational worship.

Chapter 1 begins the “intentional work of unlearning” in order to reframe how we approach ministry with children (1). Cowan describes the shortcomings of a transactional model and lays theological groundwork for the alternative models to follow by offering “four scripturally rooted ‘reframing’ statements” about children and worship (2). Chapters 2-6 provide five different models for ministry with children and each is accompanied by two case studies demonstrating how a particular model has been implemented by a local community (from different denominations in diverse locations).

Chapter 2 focuses on creating a hospitable worship environment for children through the example of pray-grounds. Chapter 3 offers strategies for sensory sensitive worship and reminds us that people with Sensory Processing Sensitivity “are not an obscure subgroup within our congregations—they’re a significant part of our worshiping body” (26). Chapter 4 argues that worship needs to extend beyond the church’s walls through missional outreach because many families with children may not attend Sunday services and the church must “meet families where they are” (40). Chapter 5 emphasizes the importance of church-school partnerships, addressing both religiously-affiliated and public schools. Finally, Chapter 6 explores children’s participation in contemporary worship through planning and leading. While the majority of this chapter is devoted to music, the case studies also demonstrate that children “contribute ideas about scripture passages, song selections, and artistic elements, provide feedback, and engage in theological reflection about worship” (71). Finally, Chapter 7 pairs insights from scripture and social science to offer four central takeaways about children’s participation in worship. These “theologically informed and research-backed takeaways” emphasize “the formative value of play, the surprising importance of boredom, the generational benefits of childhood leadership development, and the necessity of empowering parents and caregivers to be faith leaders in the home” (94).

Rather than suggesting that there is only one right way to form intentional disciples, Cowan stresses that these models are like tools in a toolbox. Readers need not feel pressured to choose one or to adopt them all, but should instead discern what will best serve their particular community, following the principle of “liturgical inculturation” (51). To assist ministers with this discernment, each chapter helpfully concludes with a list of the benefits and challenges of implementing each model and includes links to additional online resources.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is Cowan’s focus on the intimate connection between worship and the arts. My one critique is that there is little in this text about how children

might lead or participate more fully in *preaching*. While Cowan devotes significant attention to liturgical spaces, the overall worship environment, and music, he says little about preaching other than a few passing comments about how “children never seem to be in the mind of preachers when writing their sermons” (81) and “we need preaching that speaks to all ages—not just the adults” (82). Readers of *Homiletic* may be disappointed that none of the models elaborate fully on how to remedy this difficulty.

While addressed most explicitly to pastors, this book is a worthwhile read for parents, professors, and anyone invested in children’s faith formation. The book is oriented most clearly to a Protestant audience, but as a Roman Catholic reader, I found many insights applicable to my own tradition. Cowan writes with clarity, credibility, and compassion drawing on his experience as an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church, the director of the Center for Worship and the Arts at Samford University, and the father of a young daughter.

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