

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Charles R. Foster. *From Generation to Generation: The Adaptive Challenge of Mainline Protestant Education in Forming Faith*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012. 150 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-620-32195-9.

This book presents an insightful critique of virtually every church renewal movement that has emerged in recent decades. By its author's account, none of these movements has managed to attend adequately to the interrelated tasks of "nurturing in children and youth a life of faith while handing on and renewing through them their traditions of faith for the new circumstances and situations in which they find themselves" (17). Charles Foster, Professor emeritus of Religion and Education at Candler School of Theology, has written this book to encourage his readers to look beyond the immediate preoccupations of congregational life to consider how their churches can sustain long-term viability "through successive generations" (17). He desires to help churches discover how to promote both the ongoing renewal of their faith traditions and the development of vital faith among the children and youth who participate in these traditions. The result of Foster's efforts is a thought-provoking contribution to the study of congregational renewal and Christian formation.

The author begins by posing a key question: "Why, during the latter decades of the twentieth century, did the denominations of the old mainline Protestant generally cease to envision a lively and robust future for themselves through the children in their congregations" (4)? Foster suggests that the answer to this question lies in how mainline denominations have responded to the far-reaching cultural changes that have occurred in the decades since World War II. These changes, he asserts, have

posed profound challenges to how these denominations have understood their identities and mission. The upheaval and disruption of this era has led churches within these denominations to abandon their commitment to “education as a means to envision a lively and robust future for themselves through their children and youth” (5).

Foster devotes chapter two to recounting this history and to outlining his assessment of its implications for the contemporary church. In light of the developments that have occurred over the course of recent decades, he concludes that major changes are needed in how congregations and denominations approach “a faith-forming education among their children and youth to extend and renew their faith traditions into the future” (8). In developing this assertion, Foster employs Heifetz and Linsky’s distinction between *adaptive* and *technical* challenges. The challenges currently facing the church are adaptive in nature, he asserts. They call for experimentation and a willingness to engage “the unknown” (8). Foster argues that this adaptive challenge calls churches and denominations to three critical tasks.

The first task, addressed in detail in chapter three, involves rediscovering an approach to learning that is appropriate for facilitating faith formation in the congregational context. To explain this, Foster highlights the importance and interdependence of developmental, discovery, and practice learning perspectives. The developmental perspective addresses the age-appropriate *complexity* of learning tasks. Discovery learning focuses upon nurturing an environment in which the child’s *curiosity* can be engaged. Practice learning entails the acquiring of *competencies* needed “to identify with and participate fully in the religious tradition of a congregation” (9). Foster suggests that contemporary curricular resources are generally worthy of high marks for the attention they give to the importance of developmental and discovery learning. However, he asserts, practice learning has fallen into neglect. As he expresses, “When the old mainline Protestant denominations dismantled their educational infrastructure...their congregations paid less and less attention to the role of practice learning in their

education” (9). In light of this, he concludes, we should not be surprised to find that significant numbers of the children and youth who were denied opportunities to become “proficient” in the practices of the faith traditions in which they were raised no longer choose to identify with these traditions. Foster calls for a reclamation of the role of practice learning within congregations, which will enable children and youth “to come to the point where they can envision themselves as bearers of the congregation’s faith heritage and agents of its faith in the future” (93).

The second task identified by Foster, which provides the focus for chapter four, involves “revitalizing congregations as catechetical cultures of faith formation and transformation” (9). According to Foster, this is not chiefly an institutional or ideological matter. Rather, it is more relational in nature. It entails “relational practices of the congregation that influence the agency of its formal educational efforts” (97). These practices help provide the contextual conditions in which the knowledge and living-out of the faith can be formed in members of rising generations.

Foster emphasizes three congregational practices as being especially crucial to the development of a vibrant catechetical culture: hospitality, celebration, and conversation. His insights into the practice of congregational conversation are especially noteworthy. Among his observations about this practice, he notes that it is what enables children and youth to develop civility toward members of the faith community and the ability to speak in the distinctive vocabulary of the faith.

A third task, explored in chapter five, involves the cultivation of a new “educational imagination” (120) that transcends the church’s current catechetical realities. As Foster expresses, “Something more is needed; something that expands our attention from the school of the church to the celebrative events punctuating the common life of the congregation throughout the year; from the authority of designated leaders to the creativity of a congregation’s responsiveness to the redemptive and creative love of God; from the separation of the generations to their interdependence” (10).

Foster is acquainted with several congregations whose approach to faith-forming education has been transformed because their pastors and lay leaders caught a fresh, theologically-infused educational imagination. In reflecting upon the lessons to be learned from these churches, he identifies seven themes that have increasingly come to dominate his own educational imagination. These themes include the need to focus on preparing youth and children to participate in Christ's ministry in the world, the value of interdependent relationships between the generations in the church, the importance of mentoring, and the significance of nurturing the "gifts and graces of young people" (131–32).

This book's greatest strength lies in the fact that it comes from an exceptional senior scholar and churchman. After starting his career as a Minister of Education, Foster served for thirty-three years as a seminary professor. Now retired, he continues to lead workshops, speak to church groups, and work with teachers and leaders in his own congregation. The contents of this book reflect the distinctive perspective of one who has devoted many decades to rigorous study and reflection, who has acquired wisdom through wide ranging experience, and who remains vitally engaged in the life of the church, even in retirement. The ability to write from this vantage point can only be developed in precisely the way that Foster has, through a lifetime devoted to scholarship and service. It is a privilege to read the work of one possessing such a seasoned and accomplished voice.

One of this book's notable contributions is the groundbreaking way in which it brings together the themes of congregational renewal and faith formation. Countless numbers of books have been written with the intent of assisting established congregations in renewing their traditions. In addition, investing in the faith formation of rising generations is a topic explored by a host of recent authors. However, by contemplating the faith formation of the rising generations as something integrally intertwined with the renewal of the church, Foster creates an intriguing convergence of these two bodies of literature. The result is a stimulating, invigorating vision for the future of the church.

In addition, Foster's exploration of the role of Christian practices in the formation of rising generations constitutes another innovative point of convergence that presses beyond the limits of the existing literature on Christian practices and faith formation. Several authors have published outstanding reflections on the subject of Christian practices (e.g., Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra). However, with perhaps the exception of Kenda Creasy Dean, none (so far as I know) has written as extensively or insightfully about the role of Christian practices in nurturing faith within the children and youth in our midst. Foster provides a vivid account of what it might look like for children and youth to be formed by these practices as they participate in the intergenerational life of the congregation.

This book's greatest limitation may actually arise from how extensively Foster draws upon his own experience within the United Methodist tradition to illustrate his account of the adaptive challenge facing the church today. While there is immense value in how he integrates reflections on his experience into this book, some non-Methodist readers may perceive this dimension of Foster's presentation as one that detracts from its relevance or accessibility. Despite clear parallels between the United Methodist experience and that of other denominations, there also are a number of respects in which the United Methodist system is quite distinct. Readers with other denominational backgrounds, particularly those from Free Church traditions, may struggle to identify with some of the challenges native to a highly connectional and intricately structured denomination like the Methodists. At the same time, readers from other mainline traditions are likely to identify with many of the issues raised by Foster and to recognize them as analogous to struggles faced within their own denominations. In addition, Foster clearly accomplishes something important by situating his exploration of the faith formation of rising generations in the context of a period of crisis within mainline churches. The urgent realities he sees facing denominations like his own provide his motivation for writing. That being said, it would be unfortunate if this focus ended up limiting the book's audience.

There certainly are many who will be eager to read this book precisely because of the urgency they feel toward what they see is happening in their own contexts. However, there also are many churches today in which the indicators of crisis or decline are less evident, but in which a robust understanding of the important role that Christian practices can play in forming rising generations in the faith is largely absent. These churches, though perhaps outwardly manifesting signs of “vitality” or “success,” are no less in need of the opportunity to reexamine the assumptions that guide how they approach the faith development of children and youth. Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that this book will capture the attention of many potential readers, unless they identify with the crisis narrative that lies at its core. This is unfortunate. This book tackles issues that are crucial to the life of all congregations. It deserves to be read and discussed widely, even by those who do not presently perceive themselves to be in the midst of crisis.

Foster identifies four groups of potential readers that he hopes to reach with this book, each of which he sees as crucial to the conversation about the adaptive challenge facing churches today. The first group includes pastors and other individuals professionally responsible for overseeing Christian education in mainline churches, judicatories, and denominations. The second group consists of laity in mainline churches. The third is comprised of those responsible for faith formation in other traditions beyond the mainline denominations. Finally, Foster also hopes that this book will be of interest to other scholars and educators. It would be great to see this book find its way into the hands of motivated readers in each of these categories. It certainly is deserving of their attention. This would be an outstanding resource to assign to students in a seminary context as well.

Foster is to be commended for advancing an intergenerational proposal for the renewal of the church. His recommendations take seriously the need to engage the present generations, yet also reflect a sense of “deep time.” This is a refreshing departure from the bounty of books geared toward quick fixes and immediate results. Because Foster addresses challenges that truly

are adaptive in nature, this intergenerational vision may actually reflect a more realistic assessment of what the current situation requires. It may also offer a more promising path toward a vibrant future for the church.

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