



Welcome the children

Time and again in the school playground, someone will wander over and say, laughing, 'I know what you're doing for Easter/Christmas/Hallowe'en!' I have three primary-school-aged children, and they let the whole school know – friends, parents and teachers – when it's a special time of year. 'We're going to church,' they will say, 'and we'll have a really long service, and then a midnight feast!'

At a glance, children's ministry at our church looks like a disaster. There are no exciting programs with carefully constructed age-appropriate activities; no passionate teachers who devote their lives to the children; no Sunday school; not even a children's talk. But at one time or another, most of the children at our little church have thrown a tantrum when they couldn't go to church, or when it was time to go home; and many visiting children have enthused to their parents and begged to come back. Given we have no special children's program, what is it that draws children in?

It's very simple, really: we expect our children to participate fully in the worship service, and we write them into its performance.

We didn't always do it this way. But as a tiny congregation struggling to cope with an influx of children, we were forced to consider how to care for them. We read about children's faith development and learned that Christian thinkers and educators have long recognised that people come to faith primarily by engaging in the practices of faith. So we began to think about faith as a gift from God, encouraged and nurtured by exposure to the ways of faith as expressed by the gathered community. As such, we began to understand faith as a culture that children would absorb when they copied the adults around them.

Therefore, we came to the conclusion that our children needed to be alongside adult practitioners of the faith as much as possible. Setting up a program which formed teacher–student or entertainer–audience relationships would not achieve this, particularly if it ran concurrently with the worship service. Instead, we invited our children to be present at the primary place we gather as a congregation, to stand alongside the adults and build the intergenerational relationships that would ignite their faith.

As we reflected further, we also began to realise that having our children present during the service would help us more

completely embody the priesthood of all believers. While few churches dispute that children are members of the body of Christ, not many make room for children to exercise their priestly gifts during worship. But when children are excluded from participating in and contributing to the service, we all lose out. The children learn that their gifts are not needed or important, the adults miss out on the gifts that children bring, and the worshipping community no longer reflects the full body of Christ as constituted by that congregation. And so we began to keep our children in.

Once we had decided to keep our children in, we had to interrogate our service. We weren't interested in dumbing things down. We were, however, interested in finding ways to add movement and symbolic actions that would be interesting to children.

Our church uses a formal liturgical style, and we began to realise that it is well-suited to children. We repeat many songs and prayers each week, which makes it easy to memorise. Every regular attender has parts to say each week, and so it was easy to write children into these spoken parts. We also added a procession and a few small dances, we moved from spoken prayers of intercession to prayer stations with playful symbolic actions, and

we invited the children to set the communion table each week.

Of course, the ways we wove children into our service reflected the service style. Churches with different styles would need to find different ways to incorporate children; however, the questions to ask would be similar. For example, must worshippers sit still, or can people move about? Must all the words change every week, or could there be some regular responses that could be learned by heart? Could these responses be sung, and thus more easily memorised? Must a sermon be purely cognitive, or could we preach using narrative or other forms? Can a sermon engage people at different levels? Must the walls be largely undecorated, or could banners or icons or other liturgical imagery enrich the space, giving children things to look at and wonder about? By asking these and similar questions, and by thoughtfully and respectfully trying new approaches, a church can develop a service that is more welcoming to children.

Moreover, a service that engages children may also benefit adults. Many churches require a high level of literacy from its worshippers, as the service works its way through ever-changing responsive readings and prayers, and uses a cognitively challenging sermon style. Yet not all adults are literate or verbally oriented or capable of abstract thought. If the needs of children are being overlooked, chances are that the needs of some adults are also being ignored: adults who have intellectual disabilities, and adults who operate best in visual or other sensory modes. By welcoming children in, we may find ourselves more welcoming to adults.

Even so, some adults can be quite resistant to having children present during the worship service. One of the problems is an often unspoken attitude that children are somehow 'other'. Instead of honouring them as full members of the worshipping community and encouraging their presence during – and therefore accepting how they change the shape of – worship, we sometimes regard children as inherently different. Thus they are removed lest they disrupt or challenge adult behaviours and attitudes during worship.

For example, at our church, some adults have said that, while they love the idea of children being in the service, they find them too distracting. This is not because the children

run around screaming in quiet times. It is because, in the words of one member, 'they are too cute' and some adults find themselves watching the children playing quietly on the floor when they should be 'focusing on God'. They would prefer the children to be out for more of the service so that they are not distracted by them.

Implicit in this is the idea that worship requires a quiet individualistic stance, and that a successful worship service is one in which adults can focus on a God found in abstraction or silence or long words. The presence of children challenges this stance, because they do move about, they do look cute, they do boom out comments and questions from time to time, and they do become restless when a sermon goes on and on and on with no imagery or stories that they can latch on to.

Therefore, welcoming children invites us to distinguish between private devotion and public worship. The former can be quiet, introverted time; but the public liturgy is different. Public liturgy is a time for the whole community to worship God together. If we aim for perfection by cutting out anything that is messy or semi-articulate, then it is no longer the offering of us all. But when we allow children to interrogate our worship practices, we are more able to offer the worship God desires: the worship of the whole community, not just that of verbally capable adults. And we are all called to worship, so our services need to reflect this. Rather than setting the different approaches and needs of children and adults in opposition, the challenge for the church as the body of Christ is to find ways to incorporate all of these expressions into the body. This work may feel daunting, but if it is viewed as an opportunity then the experience of worship for all of us can be deeply enriched.

Including children in the liturgy does more than add a bit of movement and colour to the service. They are also a physical reminder of the incarnation. We believe in a God made visible in human flesh, in the softness and weakness and neediness of a newborn babe. The first visitors to see Jesus found him swaddled and lying in a crib; a nursing mother holding her baby is the richest icon we can have for this. As a toddler, Jesus and his family fled their country; refugee children remind us of his vulnerability and poverty. The boy Jesus asked difficult questions at



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the temple; the piercing questions of an older child might evoke the same defensive awkwardness in us that the temple authorities experienced. God was first made known to us in a child, and the presence of children in worship can illuminate and expand our understanding of this fundamental declaration of our faith. Their presence also reminds us that the sacraments are not rewards for right knowledge, but pure gift. The presence of children can help save us from a gnostic approach to our faith.

Of course, children are not present purely for adult faith formation. Instead, children must be present in the service because, like adults, they have needs which can only be met through worship. Like adults, children need to respond to God's gifts, offer praise, make statements of faith, acknowledge the spiritual dimension of their lives, make confession, and exercise their spiritual imagination. The worship service is the primary gathering of the faith community, the locus and high point, the first educational experience, and the place where the people of God begin to live out what it means to be faithful; children need to be part of all this. And in being present, children will absorb the practices of faith, and master the work and play of worship.

And if the children in our community are anything to go by, this can lead to a strong sense of belonging to the church, and a lasting commitment to the faith.

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