

## How Should Parents and the Church Welcome Children to the Lord's Supper?

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The evangelist in the Gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus welcoming the children, even at the protest of the disciples.

"People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'" (Luke 18: 15-17, NRSV)

In the conversation before this story, Jesus told a parable illustrating how humble people will be exalted in the kingdom of God. Jesus turns the societal ranking of his day upside down as he proclaims that little children and childlikeness hold a special place in the kingdom of God. By virtue of their baptism, children of all ages are welcome at the table of the Lord's Supper. Just as Jesus welcomed the little children, how then can parents and the church welcome baptized children to the Lord's Supper?

Since the decision about when a child may first receive Communion in the United Methodist Church is left up to the parents/caregivers, they often struggle with the question of when their child should begin receiving the Lord's Supper.

It is helpful to consider that children grow spiritually by participating in the life of the church, including the Lord's Supper. They experience the world through their bodies and make meaning about these experiences through their senses. Children have a strong need to belong. What better place for children to know they are valued than in their faith community! When children share in the meal of the Lord's Supper they know they have a place where they can experience God's unconditional love and belonging in the faith community.

To begin thinking about the question of how to welcome children to the Lord's Supper, consider forming a task force in your local church consisting of people that care about children, such as parents, liturgists, Christian educators, public school teachers, social workers, and clergy. With each of the suggestions below, you will want to make adjustments for children with disabilities or special needs in ways that invite those children to participate. For able-bodied and disabled children alike, the experience of the Lord's Supper meets them at the level of the heart and body rather than the head.

Below are suggestions that will help your local church begin to welcome children to the Lord's Supper. You will want to consider what is most applicable and make adaptations. The suggestions are organized into three areas of ministry.

## In the Life of the Church

- Perhaps a rather obvious point is to arrange the Sunday morning schedule so that Christian education and worship are held at different times. This way parents/caregivers can worship with their children and be present in worship for the Lord's Supper. Sunday school teachers can also be nourished through worship and the Lord's Supper.
- Children experience being welcomed at the Table when they are included in the full life of the church. Intergenerational involvement in missions, stewardship, worship, fellowship, and Christian education builds bridges where faith is passed on from older to younger generations, and the younger generations experience belonging to the faith community.

## In Worship

- Bread that is baked at the church on the morning of a Communion service will fill the church building with a welcoming aroma. You may want to have children make bread dough that day if there is enough time for the bread to bake before worship. If your congregation regularly serves wheat bread, consider offering the choice of non-wheat bread since some children are allergic to wheat. See "**How Inclusive Is Your Communion Table?**"
- Provide booster seats in the pew or on chairs (strapping the booster seats safely onto the chairs) for toddlers and preschoolers so they can see the presider and so they can see during the entire worship service or invite the children up front.
- *(For parents or others sitting with children)* Guide children through the Communion liturgy by pointing to the congregational responses. Even non-readers and young readers will sense the pattern of congregational participation. As children participate over time, they will learn the responses by heart and in their hearts.
- Invite children to process the bread and cup to the Lord's Table at the time of the offering. Children take in what it means to participate in ritual through using their bodies. They also experience being part of the faith community through having a role in worship.
- Full, rich, sensual ritual actions will draw children into the ritual through their senses. Intentional arm and hand gestures by the presiding minister help express the meaning of the words and emphasize parts of the Great Thanksgiving prayer. The presider can pour the juice from a pitcher into the chalice at the table, allowing time for the unrushed gesture and the sound of the pouring to be heard. The single uncut loaf of bread can be raised high and broken unhurriedly. Likewise, the cup can be fully raised in view of the entire congregation. See *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (36-39 and 54-79) for specific suggestions regarding gestures. Also see *The Lord Be With You: A Visual Handbook for Presiding in Christian Worship* by Charles D. Hackett and Don E. Saliers (OSL Publications, 1990) and *Strong, Loving and Wise* by Robert W. Hovda (Liturgical Press, 1983)
- As children are served the bread and cup, address each child by name. The server may kneel or bend down, lowering the bread and cup, and look at the child face-to-face. Children will feel more a part of the faith

community when they are met at their own level, physically and developmentally.

- If your church has a message for children in worship, explore themes that make connections to the Lord's Supper. You might talk with children about special meals, about bread related to the earth, growing bodies and spirits, and about inviting people to eat together from many different places and ages — just to name a few topics — and relate them to the Lord's Supper. Keep it simple without using metaphors, similes, or analogies that children have no experience with because they may not be able to make the abstract connection.
- Offer occasional worship designed for children and parents/caregivers with celebration of the Lord's Supper. The worship leaders and presider can take time for teaching about the Lord's Supper at appropriate moments during the service. This should be considered an additional way of welcoming children to the table and not a replacement for children participating in the Sunday morning Communion services.

### **In Christian Education Settings**

- There are many "feeding stories" in the Old and New Testament that children and parents can explore together. Children understand the world through stories. Providing several ways to respond to the "feeding stories" through art, drama, music, creative writing, or nature, allows children to intertwine the Divine story with their own stories.
- Children, parents, and clergy could take a tour of the sanctuary. This would be a time for the children to ask questions and learn about the different ways that the Lord's Supper is served in your particular church. They could also practice singing or speaking the congregational responses for the next upcoming Communion service so they become familiar with them.
- We think primarily about preparing children for Communion. However, children may have questions or responses they want to share after they receive the Lord's Supper. Consider providing opportunities for children to share their Communion experiences through discussion or expressing themselves in an art form.
- Young children may be unsure about mixing the taste of bread and grape juice. They could try it out with a taste test at home.
- Provide a setting where parents/caregivers can talk about their own questions related to children and the Lord's Supper. It would be helpful for parents/caregivers to talk about their own first Communion. Adults in the same family might have different experiences that come out of different faith traditions. Some of adults' concerns and practices with their children grow out of their own experiences of the Lord's Supper.
- For a discussion about whether or not to adapt words in the Lord's Supper liturgy for children, see the article **"Children and Communion — Should We Change the Words?"**