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# Bringing Children into Body Life Through Congregational Worship

By Carolyn Mitchell

Until they are baptized, our children may be viewed as “waiting” to be members of the body. Since the baptism of our children in Churches of Christ occurs after several years of involvement in church life, preparation for baptism and incorporation into body life must include training and participation in congregational worship appropriate to the “waiting” member. Worship has been the basic way by which people have learned what it means to be a Christian. That is the way we learned, and we must assume that our children learn the same way. Worship brings the stories of our faith and the story of our lives together. Our identity as disciples of Christ and as members of the body of Christ arises out of this continual process of hearing and telling the story. The faith is transmitted through proclamation, praise, prayer, and ritual.<sup>0</sup>

It must be realized that worship begins in the home. A child learns to worship just as he learns to speak, with the example and involvement (ideally) of two loving parents. Alongside this experience comes reinforced, deliberate education. But finally, a child learns to be a Christian only within a living and worshipping Christian community.

Since children learn to worship in the presence of worshipping adults, we need a more enlightened understanding of what worship is. If children are to be prepared for worship, then worship must be prepared and planned with the children in mind. Families at home do not just ask, What can we do for our children? but

they also continually think and plan for activities they can do together. In the same way, the church family should consciously and deliberately seek ways in which they can worship together.

We must look seriously at what our children and youth learn when they are in the Sunday morning worship service. Many Christian educators have noted the simple but profound fact that in Judaism and Christianity, the most important and influential educational arm of the church is the regular worship of the community of believers. This is where the Story is told and where our stories are related to it in the most impressive and memorable ways. Formal church schooling must supplement, but never displace the educational experience of meaningful corporate worship that overwhelms our thoughts, our emotions, and our senses. We want to afford our children good experiences of personal participation in the fellowship of love and joy and corporate learning among the community of believers.

## **Children: Partners in the Worshiping Community**

Because children come into our adult world, just as they did into Jesus', how we involve or separate them in our worship is a clear statement of what we believe and who we are. We are a community—a family—and our worship is a corporate action. Children are added to this body and must be greeted into it wholeheartedly, regardless of their own abilities to fully comprehend what



worship is. We are all called into community with God as community, and not as individuals.

Children need a strong sense of being accepted and wanted by the entire congregation. David Ng points out that children receive conflicting messages as to their place in our worshipping community:

- Children are an important and loved part of this household
- Children do not belong with us
- Children are cute and entertaining
- Children are capable of profound understanding
- Children have nothing to give
- Children can contribute to and enrich our worship
- Children can bother us
- Children's concerns are ours<sup>1</sup>

Children know when they are being included and when they are being excluded. They know the discrimination and deprivation of being excluded. They have a sense of the meagerness in a church that believes only with its cognitive faculties.<sup>2</sup>

There are essentially two schools of thought about children in the public assembly. One is that preparation and accommodation should be made so that they can participate with the whole people of God. The other is that the movement and noise of children is a distraction to many and may embarrass the parents, to say nothing of the negative condition and anguish effected by the enforcement of sitting still for an hour.<sup>3</sup> But basically, the deciding factor in the second school of thought is, Will they bother anyone? Bringing small children into our midst is something like letting the littlest member of the family eat at the supper table even though his manners are not so elegant. Children just do not "fit" into a solemn assembly where everything is done "decently and in order." Children will wiggle, poke, and swing their legs simply because they are children, but they will also sing along with us, and pray with us, and give with us.<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally, worship in Churches of Christ has been a very adult affair, definitely not designed to hold the interest of children. Children, who live in a world of the senses, find that our worship, in general, contains no smell and has little touch, movement, or feeling. Its primary requirements are a cultivated mind and reasonably good ears for hearing the Word read and preached. This is an almost impossible attainment for children who have short attention spans.

Worship does not have to be narrowly adult-oriented. Worship can have the depth of content and the integrity that reflect the highest of biblical and traditional standards and at the same time have appeal to children.<sup>5</sup>

We often treat our children with condescension through a kind of tokenism in which we involve them in activities that seem excessively childish and almost inconsequential. This means that cute tricks or gimmicks that put them on display, although charming to watch, do not constitute authentic worship. Could we possibly consider children's "problems" to be assets? If their movements and rhythms are so distracting, maybe we are sitting too still. Maybe their openness and humor could flavor our holy somberness. Perhaps their intellectual limitations and attention spans could cause us to be more biblical in the simplicity and the concreteness of our speech and action.

A great deal is lost in the worship of Churches of Christ when there is too much sameness of age, facial expression, affluence, and use of hearing and intellect only for worship to the God who loves all kinds of people. If the worship of God is intended to be so solemn, serious, and subdued that children must be bored or excluded, then children will not have much to give in return. Children who are led to believe that their only important contribution to the public worship is to refrain from being a distraction may learn to behave well but not to worship.

If the worship of the congregation is not relevant to children, then it ought to be changed. Worship should be a celebration of all God's people together in the community of faith. When children do not share their experience with the whole congregation, then our children and the congregation as a whole miss something crucial to being the church, the body of Christ.

### **How Do Children Enter Congregational Worship?**

To what extent ought children to participate in worship? Children should be given responsibilities in worship as they are able to assume them. Through participation, children learn not only about worship, but to worship. Each one in the church, child and adult, teaches the other.

Each child needs opportunities to respond to God's call.

Worship is intended as a means of response and children need to participate in individual and collective responses. Prayers of praise, gifts of self,



statements of belief, and songs of dedication are activities children need to practice, as do adults. Whatever one's age, child and adult alike need to express the spiritual dimension of life and allow it to be nurtured.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of children's participation is to help them "understand" or know what they cannot understand or know in any other way. The child now knows, not because he or she has been told by someone, but because of the movement that has gone on inside of him or her. The child becomes part of it. He or she "knows" *koinonia*. Although the child's first experience of the Christian faith is unavoidably secondhand, with our help it may slowly become authentically the child's own through the nurture of body life and corporate worship.

If we learn anything from the Scriptures about the response that pleases God most, it is simple, trusting, "childlike" faith, not sophistication or eloquence. We need children in our worship to urge us closer to a biblical response—direct, simple, and spontaneous; love, joy and thankfulness exuberantly and emotionally expressed. As we understand more fully the purpose of Christian worship, we become more aware of the contributions that children might make to the corporate worship of the community. Encouraging them is then seen to be a vital aspect of our worship planning.

### Expectations for the Worshipping Community

Simply speaking, worship needs to be the enjoyment of God that results in what William Hendricks calls a balance of the "holy and happy" for both adults and children.<sup>7</sup> Differing styles of worship services provide expression for the different tastes in worship, since worship style is a matter of preference. Worship leaders have the responsibility of planning worship services in which both the dignified and the spontaneous are given expression. Having both the "holy" and the "happy," Hendricks believes, is a theological requirement. By worshipping in a well-balanced community, children will become comfortable, involved, and knowledgeable, having a better foundation for Christian theology than those whose worshipping community does not provide this balance. Good worship invites openness and honesty. "God has nothing to fear from openness and we have everything to gain."<sup>8</sup> When Jesus placed a child in the midst of adults, the child became the teacher. Children can teach adults to be open and spontaneous in their own worship.

John Cairns and Greg Funfgeld have offered a list of legitimate expectations for the worshipping community:

- That no one be bored
- That all our senses be involved and faculties developed
- That our baptismal commitment to each other be actualized
- That all participants have the opportunity to contribute
- That persons be able to receive gifts from each other
- That worshippers be a source of surprise and spontaneous inspiration for each other
- That worshippers be vulnerable
- That signs and imagery be developed corporately and shared, so that worshippers may grow in faith
- That faith be transmitted through rituals and the input of previous generations
- That elements of worship such as prayer and praise be an essential part of the daily life of all Christians
- That attention be given to the level of understanding of each member<sup>9</sup>

Practically and specifically, how can we provide for the participation of our children in worship?

### Getting Started

When adults think back to their childhood and youth, it is surprising that what happened to them in church, rather than Sunday school, is what they usually remember. They remember the congregation's observance of regular worship, celebrations, and traditions.

We need to include our children in public worship in as natural a manner as possible, rather than in a way that is special or dramatic. We can do this, perhaps, by adding one new experience at a time. However, while we want it to feel natural, some planning is required. What follows is a collection of ideas for involving children and youth in the body life and, in particular, in the worship services of the church. Children must be involved in routine activities as well as exciting ones in order for their incorporation to be experienced and perceived as authentic.

Children may:

- Greet at the sanctuary door, usher, and give out bulletins
- Read scriptures and offer prayers, or make announcements



- Sing in choruses or Bible musicals
- Make banners
- Write poetry or prayers to use in worship
- Decorate bulletin or order of worship covers, or bulletin boards
- Take up the offering and be invited to pledge
- Participate in planning the worship service, especially a Child Dedication service
- Share projects developed in Sunday school during worship
- Bake the communion bread (perhaps with the entire family), or prepare the elements
- Assist communion stewards
- Write “encouragement” cards to those with illness, birthdays, new babies, special honors, etc.
- Be a part of teams that work on church property
- Collect pantry items for the needy
- Have mail or verbal requests directed specifically to them
- Share in preparation of the sanctuary (bring flowers, etc.)

There appears to be very little scriptural limitation on the involvement of children in public worship. Limitations are largely in our imagination or in our will.

***EXCURSUS I: Should Unbaptized Children Observe the Lord’s Supper?***

The special problem of unbaptized children observing the Lord’s Supper is an issue which sometimes arises in Churches of Christ. Most of the arguments for the participation of children in the Eucharist have been from paedobaptist traditions, where children are already baptized and are considered to be members of the body. They are not arguing, therefore, that unbaptized children should be admitted. For this reason, their dis-

cussion has little relevance for Churches of Christ.

Since the scriptures are silent as to the practice of unbaptized children observing the Lord’s Supper, we must try to come to an understanding of what the scriptures’ intent might be in its observance. The significance of the Lord’s Supper would be different for an unbaptized child than for a baptized one. Participation in the Lord’s Supper falls short, it would seem, if the participator can not understand his actions; the Lord’s Supper would thereby be “trivialized.” Children can certainly prepare for the Lord’s Supper, just as they do for baptism, but the “practice” is something altogether different. To more appropriately discern the Lord’s body, children should probably wait (with great anticipation) for the time of baptism and incorporation into the body.

However, there are two sides even to this coin. There is something to be said for children eating together with the family, if the breaking of the bread is understood in a more informal way. This would of course, emphasize the communal nature of the family and the teaching aspect of natural observance (such as in the participation of children in the Passover).

No doubt, more study should be given to this question.

***EXCURSUS II: Children and the Sermon (See “A Plea to Preachers from Friends of Children” in this issue of Leaven)***

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**Notes**

<sup>0</sup> John H. Westerhoff III, *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston Press, 1980) 41.

<sup>1</sup> David Ng and Virginia Thomas, *Children in the Worshiping Community* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981) 15.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Wessler, “Can the Children Have a Story?” *APCE Advocate* (Holland, Michigan).

<sup>3</sup> Ernest W. Freund “Worship Workshop, or What To Do While the Sermon’s On,” *APCE Advocate* (Holland, Michigan, Feb. 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth B. McAfee, “Small Child in the Pew or the Primary Child Comes to Church and Parents Sometime Wonder Why,” (Pamphlet by Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.)

<sup>5</sup> Ng and Thomas, 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> William L. Hendricks, *A Theology for Children* (Nashville: Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1980) 186.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>9</sup> Ng and Thomas, 120.