

“Towards an Integrative View of Children in Worship”

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Many congregations will claim to have a concern for the inclusion of children in worship. What this precisely means, however, will vary greatly. For some congregations, this merely represents a wish for children to be bodily present in corporate worship, with no particular desire to modify practices of worship in any way to reflect the presence of children. Children are there to learn what it means to worship like adults, and to grow into “appropriate” forms of behaviour. We might call this a *locative* view of children in worship. For other congregations, including children in worship means making additions to the forms and environment of worship to make it more palatable to children. This is commonly done through the use of children’s sermons, children’s choirs, activity sheets and “busy bags” for children. However, there is no essential change to the basic practices of worship. We might call this a *supplemental* view of children in worship. There are far fewer congregations who have gone beyond this point to embrace children as equal participants in the whole of worship, experimenting with the entirety of worship and its settings to fully involve children as members of an intergenerational worshipping community. We might call this an *integrative* view of children in worship.

Beyond these congregations, there is of course another grouping: those congregations which have effectively taken the view that corporate worship is not for children, excluding children from involvement through parallel programming. In these congregations, Sunday school takes place at the same time as worship, and there are frequently nurseries for the caretaking of the youngest of children during worship services. Children may be present for sections of the service, but then are enjoined to depart so that the adults can get on with the “real” business of worship. While some very creative programming for children has emerged around this practice (e.g. children’s church, *Godly Play*), the basic message given is that “real”

worship is the province of adults.

At the same time, many congregations have embraced styles of worship which inadvertently diminish the participation of and denude the experience of children in worship. Many so-called contemporary forms of worship, designed by and for the “Baby Boomer” generation, have de-emphasised ritual, repetition and symbolism. Change and variety are the only constant, and traditional vehicles for the “telling of the story”, such as the church year and its festivals and paraments and vestments, are set aside as “stuffy” and archaic. In responding to a perceived mechanistic dryness and formalism, such congregations have embraced directions which only serve to take away the few (albeit still insufficient) existent avenues for engagement of children. Congregations with an *integrative* view of children in worship have sought a third way, transcending both the rigidity of traditional worship and the demystification associated with “Baby Boomer” worship to create rich, liturgical experiences both looking back to the roots of the Christian tradition and forward to a new way of being with children in intergenerational worship.

In the remainder of this paper I will seek to propose a number of “theses” which might undergird an *integrative* approach to the inclusion of children in worship.

Worship is a divine-human encounter where God serves people of all ages through Word and Sacrament, acting in and upon them by means of law and gospel to create them anew for relationship with himself, each other and the world beyond.

Marginalisation of children in and from worship frequently reflects an understanding of worship as something that humans do. One’s capacity for worship is then related to one’s ability to take part in the practices of corporate worship. In the modern era, the cognitive faculties have been particularly emphasised. It follows, *ipso facto*, that full participation in worship is related to one’s ability to mentally comprehend what is occurring, and to respond accordingly. The

implicit conclusion is that worship is essentially an adult activity into which children must “grow” over time.¹ At the heart of this argument is a profound theological misconception. It is God who is the actor in worship, calling people of all ages together and serving them through the means of grace to kill by means of the law and raise to new life through the gospel. Children, to the extent that they are permitted to participate, are equal and needy recipients of God’s divine workings in and through corporate worship.² Jesus’ injunction to “let the children come to me” that he might bless them is instructive here (Mark 10: 14-16). An *integrative* approach to children and worship ushers forward children to receive the good gifts of God, and enables them to fully engage in the whole of the liturgical God-human encounter, that they might receive all of blessings of God imparted therein.³

Children may not worship in the same ways as adults, but they are nevertheless fully gifted and enabled for participation in worship.

While humans can only truly worship the Triune God as they are empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit employs the natural characteristics and aptitudes of persons to bring forth praise and honour to God. Children are excluded from meaningful participation in corporate worship

¹ Pritchard expresses the same thought in the following statement: ‘Children who are kept from the liturgy are learning that the parish is not an inclusive community but an adult club; that its sacred space is for grown ups only; that its normative rituals need to be mediated through adult patterns of understanding before they can be experienced, or else it must be watered down into kiddie versions; that the gospel message is somehow different for children and adults’ [1992: 142-143]. Stonehouse observes that when the attention is upon the ‘cognitive knowing of God, adults overlook the young child’s experience of God’ [1998: 128]. Weil notes that over-emphasis on the cognitive has meant that children have been regarded as ‘pre-liturgical’. In over-emphasising the rational faculties ‘we elevate that aspect of the human person out all proportion to other aspects of personality, including the affective and intuitive powers which children manifest at an early age’ [1983: 56].

² As Pritchard expresses, ‘baptized children are not recruits or trainees. They are Christians. It is their birthright as Christians to be included in the life of God’s people in community: to approach God in awe and love in worship, to be welcomed into sacred space, to receive Christ’s Body and Blood, to know and to be known to their fellow parishioners by name, and to express their faith in service, not as a class exercise only, but as members of the parish family’ [1992: 143].

³ John Westerhoff makes the following statement in the Foreword to Pritchard’s book: ‘By neglecting the centrality of ritual worship and keeping children away from “adult” liturgy, or not permitting them full participation, we have made it extremely difficult for their lives to be shaped in Christ-like ways’ [Pritchard 1992: xv].

when their God-given capacities for worship are not understood or appreciated. Ironically, writers on children and worship frequently note that, developmentally speaking, children are more inclined toward wholistic expressions of worship than are adults.

Children have certain abilities and attitudes which lie at the heart of worship. They are aware of their environment and the community around them. They are capable of intense identification and imaginative hearing. They are infectiously enthusiastic. They can be sacrificially generous and honest in their responses. They respond physically and emotionally to what they see and hear. ... Children bring to worship a directness and simplicity of faith. They are spontaneous. They are receptive and have hope. They know how to show thankfulness and joy; indeed, they show these feelings more wholly and wholeheartedly than do most adults. In many ways children enrich the worship of the church [Ng & Thomas 1981: 16, 23].

Children are ready to worship. They are ready to acknowledge, rehearse and proclaim with the gathered community. Their wonderful openness, their colorful imaginations, and their sense of wonder all combine to put them in a state of readiness for worship. Our problem has been that we have insisted on treating them like little adults [Juengst 1994: 19].

[C]hildren naturally worship. ... Worship understood as the entering into of another reality, the reality of the kingdom, is something the child can readily resonate with, perhaps more readily than the adult. When the child is told that one goes to church to meet God and that the church is God's house, the child accepts and believes. ... The child has a sense of the numinous, the holy. ... The child is *homo adorans* [Tarasar 1983: 53].

[Y]oung children exhibit two striking characteristics that assist us in our efforts to lead them into sacred story and symbol and ritual and, thus, into worship. The first is that children's sense of wonder is not yet jaded. ... A second persistent characteristic of the very young that leads them naturally into worship is that they are prelogical in their reasoning processes. ... Adults, who understand so much, want to understand everything; but children are willing to stand unembarrassed before mystery. Adults all too often look upon the unexplained as weird, foolish, impossible; but children live in a world still bursting with miracles. What an advantage children have, then, when it comes to the mysteries of our faith! [Berglund 1994: 43].

An *integrative* approach to children and worship respects what children bring to worship, and makes room for them to worship in the manner for which God has gifted them. It also seeks to provide experiences where the childhood sense of wonder can be engaged in praise of God. In other words, an *integrative* approach helps children to worship as children. The question is not "how can we make our children into worshippers?", but "how can we worship together with our children and enable their worship?"⁴ Or, as Fairless asks, "what happens when we dare assume

⁴ Frequently the attention given to the place of children in worship centres around their "disruptive" behaviour (i.e. disrupting to adult experiences of worship). The question arising is then "how can we ensure our children

that children have the same claim on the space, ritual, style and content of worship as do adults?”
[Fairless 2000: 11].

***Enabling the worship of children means creating multi-sensory forms of worship where
children can participate, contribute and lead alongside adults.***

Following on from our previous thesis, an *integrative* approach to children and worship nurtures a multi-sensory conception and practice of worship, whereby children and adults together encounter God in a variety of ways. Children, by nature, appropriate experiences through all of their senses.

For all young children, learning is a total and sensory experience. They learn through all of their senses simultaneously. They take in the sights and sounds, smells and tastes, as they take in the whole of a new experience. ... Such total investigation takes place in worship as well. Young children apprehend worship through all of their senses - smell and touch even taste, as well as sight and hearing [Becker et al 1999: 13].

Children want to touch with their hands, see with their eyes, hear with their ears, smell with their noses, taste with their palates and rejoice, dance and be themselves with their whole bodies [Jeggle-Merz 1996: 117].

It is through multi-sensory worship that children literally “taste and see that the Lord is good” and find refuge in Him (Psalm 34:8). Creating “room” for children to worship therefore involves giving attention to children’s capacity to view the events of worship; the use of visuals; the use of sounds and smells and tastes; the use of physical objects and touch; opportunities and freedom for bodily movement and expression; employment of ritual; the use of repetition; the use of drama, story-telling and imaginative thought; and the use of the arts (drawing, painting etc.) and creative play.⁵ As Fairless puts it, the task is to ‘develop an environment so filled with images

are ‘good’ in worship?”. The consequence is that a fundamental law-orientation becomes the basis upon which we approach issues of children in worship. If going to church is about being good and it is hard for children to be “good”, then they experience worship as law and judgement, not as grace and freedom.

⁵ As Ng & Thomas express, ‘the church can strive to make the child’s experience of worship warm, accepting, rich with visual and aural imagery, and rich with routine and ritual’ [1981: 38].

and art and symbols of God, to recreate with our own hands and our own tongues such a portrait of God's redemptive work, to show by the way we are with one another the irresistible reconciling love of God, that we never forget how it is with God' [2000: 121]. Liturgical innovation is thereby implied. The challenge is not to remove but reinvent aspects of liturgical practice such that they are imbued with the multi-sensory, drawing children and adults alike into rich and concrete experiences of God in their midst. Creative restoration of the pageantry of the church year into the rhythms of congregational life also offers great possibilities for enriching intergenerational worship through use of the multi-sensory.⁶

At the heart of children-inclusive worship is an attitude of love and acceptance toward children, expressed in and through personal relationships within the worshipping community.

An important element of children's experience of worship is interaction with other members of their worshipping communities. Westerhoff describes the faith of children as "affiliative faith": children affiliate with the faith of those with whom they are in relationship and interpret it through their experiences in community:

In the beginning of our pilgrimage, the gift of faith comes to us when we observe and copy others, when we explore and test; it comes through feelings or sensory experiences in the form of interactions with others and our world. The foundations of faith are found in experiences in which we learn to trust other people, ourselves and our world, not because we are told we are of worth and the world is trustworthy, but because we experience it as such. ... Our actions with our children influence their perceptions and their faith much more than the words we speak. Our actions frame what our children will experience. While we do not give our children faith, we do influence the character of the faith by how we behave with them. From the start, a child's life includes others outside the immediate family. Thus the gift of faith is directly related to a family's participation in a community's rituals, symbols and myths. Affiliative faith looks to the community and its traditions as its source for authority. We depend on significant others for the stories that explain our lives and how our people live. Belonging to a community is very important in order to fulfil our need to be wanted and accepted [1980: 26].

⁶ See Pritchard 1992: 73ff.

In worship, it is not only the experience of worship that matters, but the relationships with others involved in the worship. Children who experience the love and care of adults in their faith community experience this as the love and care of God himself. Moreover, the security of belonging to a caring, affirming community frees children to participate more openly and uninhibitedly in worship.

Children's experience of worship is developed and enhanced when direct connections are built between corporate worship and the 'domestic church'.

The home is a powerful and abiding influence upon the faith formation of children, including their apprehension and experience of corporate worship.⁷ In the first place, parents play a crucial role in assisting their children to worship. Secondly, worship practices in the home both prepare children for participation in corporate worship and help them to understand and appropriate it more deeply. Thirdly, where the life and events of the home are brought into the sphere of corporate worship through prayer and family involvement, the child's experience of worship becomes more concrete and direct. An *integrative* approach to children and worship includes the integration of congregation and home as two inter-related worshipping communities.

The inclusion of children in worship is enhanced through an intentional process of preparation of children and adults alike for shared, intergenerational worship.

If worship is the central activity of congregational life, and if the inclusion of children in worship is a key value, then it follows that the other activities of the congregation should prepare children and adults alike for shared experiences of worship. Children are prepared for intergenerational worship as they take part in prayer, ritual and liturgy in Christian education contexts and in the

⁷ See Ng & Thomas 1981: 66ff.

home. Parents and other adults are prepared for intergenerational worship as they themselves grow in their understanding of worship and of childhood development through congregational classes and workshops. And children and adults alike are readied for worship as they join together to plan and make practical preparations for corporate liturgical celebration.

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