

Protagonist Corner

Listening to the Children

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It was a spur of the moment idea, ignited by an article I'd read in the Easter, 1994, issue of *Journal for Preachers*. In his reminder to preachers of the ability of children to think theologically, Ronald Cram had written:

I am very fortunate to be a member of a congregation that values children. But with a worship service that has not taken seriously the child in other than choir focused ways, it is all I am able to do to convince by eight-year-old daughter, Katherine Naomi, to attend Sunday worship. One Sunday after church, it occurred to me that I had never asked Kathrine Naomi what she would consider to be "good worship." The response was immediate. "If I could help plan church we would sing and then talk. Sing and then talk. Sing and then talk. Sing and then talk...."

I am the pastor of a congregation that values children (or, at least, I and the other adults here like to think so). In fact, at the very moment the thought of asking children of University Presbyterian the question, "If it were up to you, how would you plan church?" occurred to me, our worship planning team was engaged in sifting through ideas for our Children's Sabbath observance. We'd already decided that eight-year-old Clayton's drawing would grace the bulletin cover, that self-portraits painted by the children in church school would wreath the brick walls of the sanctuary, that the children's choir would sing, and that the middle schoolers would serve as liturgists and the senior highs as ushers.

But an ancient memory from my own adolescence restrained me from suggesting that we actually ask the children, "How would you plan church?"

I was sixteen or so when our minister returned from a week of study leave. Hyped up over what he had learned at the conference he had attended, he was quivering to put his new ideas into practice in our church.

One of these great new ideas was a youth Bible study and prayer group that would meet at 6:30 A.M. before we went to school. Being the oldest and the only driver among the five McGregor kids, my parents assigned me the role of chauffeur for my brother and sister as well as a couple of other folks we were to pick up on the way.

The first day that we gathered, the minister invited us to bring a Bible passage the next week, and then he would craft sermons based on our concerns. "Well, this isn't so bad," I mused. I wasn't a big fan of sermons anyway. It might be pretty interesting to hear a sermon based on something that was bothering me. And something *was* bothering me.

My Deep South high school had been desegregated three years before, and tensions were high. African American and white students rarely interacted with one another. Racist jokes and comments abounded among my white friends. Did the Bible have anything to say about this?

I searched the Bible all week, and I finally found a verse I thought applied,

Galatians 3:28. At the next meeting, I handed my suggestion to our minister.

I still recall the look on his face. It was fear, I now realize. And, of course, he never preached a sermon based on my suggestion.

Now that I am a minister myself, one who has betrayed more people in the congregations I've served by my lack of courage than I'd care to admit, I've long ago forgiven my minister for what he did to me as a teenager. But that experience taught me that to ask a question as my minister did of me that day forges a covenant, a covenant that implies listening and response on the part of the one who asks.

Did I dare ask the question, "If it were up to you, how would you plan church?" as Cram had suggested I do, knowing full well that embedded in the question was a promise to the children that I would listen and at least consider change?

Perhaps it was curiosity as much as anything that prompted me to draw in a deep breath and ask. But ask I did, and here, in part, are some of the letters I received:

"I think the first thing I'd change is the music. I'd make all the hymns rap. I'd make the pipe organ an electric guitar. I'd also make the prayers a rap. That about all I'd change."

"I think that Lois (the music director) and Victor (the organist) should have a pay increase. They have been most important in this church. Thank you."

"This is a funny way I'd make church. We'd talk about the sports that they played during Jesus' life. Also we'd have a basketball court and we'd play thirty-minute basketball games. Also we'd sing a church song at the beginning of the basketball games instead of the national anthem. Also at halftime we'd baptize people. Also at the end we'd have lunch at church."

"I think that every other week that youth should do the service and the weeks they aren't, you should."

I was touched by the responses, all thoughtful, not a silly one among them. In fact, as I have reflected upon the letters I received, read them as "official communications" to the session, and chatted further with the children who wrote them, I've discovered something. It is that the church, while still a long way from perfectly embodying Jesus' words, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," is perhaps doing a better job than we have sometimes thought at creating a sacred space in the lives of children where they learn the love of God; and at imparting the values of loving God and neighbor, of putting others first, of believing that every person is a person of worth not because he or she is slim or smart or beautiful or athletic or rich, but simply because they are God's children who are gathered up in the loving arms of Jesus Christ.

I'm praying that one of these days the twelve-year-old who advocated for pay increases for the music staff will commit to confronting inequality and injustice in society with that same kind of fervor, because of what he learned at church, not in spite of it. And that cherubic five-year-old Allison, who in response to my query, "Tell me about this picture you've drawn," beamed "That's me, preaching about love in front of the church," will find herself, by God's grace, doing precisely that because she is encouraged by adults who take her seriously and accompany her all along her faith journey.

But it depends, at least in part, on how faithful we are in listening to our children. A prayer or two in rap to balance Pachelbel's *Canon in D*? I don't doubt for a minute that it's worth it.