

Let the Children Come

Deuteronomy 6:4, 7 and Mark 9:36-37

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Two Sunday school teachers entered the sanctuary. Together they stretched to attach a six-foot, brown butcher paper tree from the top of the lectern. The tree had an array of colorful autumn leaves taped throughout its branches. Amid the branches where children's drawings of squirrels and birds.

Several kindergartners and first graders with sashes and headbands joined the teachers.

"Who is coming? Can you see anyone?"

"I can't see anything," responded the voices.

"I'm going to climb that tree," said Kreddie Zacchaeus, one of the littlest of the crowd as she climbed the chancel steps into the top of the lectern tree.

From the back of the sanctuary came Jesus and two disciples. As they approached the base of the lectern tree Rachel, as Jesus, looked up and said, "Come out of the tree, Zacchaeus."

Kreddie Zacchaeus furrowed her eyebrows.

She looked at Jesus and the disciples.

She looked at the congregation.

But she did not answer.

Kreddie Zacchaeus opened her mouth to respond, then, closed it again, seeming puzzled.

Everyone waited for an answer.

Kreddie Zacchaeus thought.

"OK!!" shouted Kreddie Zacchaeus suddenly.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Was this presentation of the gospel part of an evening pageant or a Sunday school drama?

No. The K-First graders were participants in Sunday morning worship.

No script. No long-range plan. No rehearsals. Just the children's interpretation of Luke's story as it had been read that morning during Sunday school and the knowledge that they would "tell" the story to the rest of the congregation.

In 1992 First Presbyterian Church, Durham, North Carolina, experienced a surge of young families with children, including one-half dozen babies born to members. What a marvelous burst of energy for any congregation, but especially for a historic, downtown congregation. At the same time, a number of families were visiting First Presbyterian and choosing not to stay because children's activities and/or Sunday School were not offered as "an alternative" for their children during worship.

The session approved the appointment of a task force to explore "children and worship." (Previous explorations of ministries with children and youth have occurred...a necessary reminder of "reformed and always reforming!")

The task force consisted of parents with children whose ages ranged from newborn to elementary, two youths who had grown up in the church, and a few nonparents. To

enhance the worship life of children and parents was the initial focus. Soon, it became obvious that the real question was how to enhance the worship life of the congregation. How could children learn to love worship? How could adults and children live their baptismal vows to “guide and nurture, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of this church”?¹

Worship and Christian education are inseparable. Distinguishing where education “stops” and worship “begins” is often difficult and probably not necessary except to ensure their dialogue. Christian education is no substitute for real, living membership in the community of faith. That does not make it unimportant. It is vital that children (as well as adults) learn to use the Bible and the vocabulary of our faith, to understand that there is real intellectual meat on the bones of the creeds, that the gospel challenges them on every level of their minds as well as their hearts and their hands and their whole lives.²

David Ng and Virginia Thomas looked to early worship and education in the synagogue and expressed the following.

How did the Hebrew child learn to worship? First, through a relationship with a worshipping parent, a member of a worshipping community; through intentional education built into the rituals of home and community worship; through a multitude of sensory experiences and vivid, thought-provoking symbols and dramas; through a life of ethical actions growing out of worship; through a pattern of recurring sabbath and festivals that recreated the Hebrews’ story; and eventually through a form of public, community gathering which made teaching an essential part of the liturgy.³

Like many churches First Presbyterian’s Sunday school classes begin at 9:45 A.M. and conclude between 10:30A.M. and 10:45A.M. for 11A.M. worship. (First Presbyterian follows the *Service of the Lord’s Day* order of worship.) At the time the task force was convened the morning “scenario” was that parents gathered their children after Sunday school and joined together in worship. “Time with Children” followed the confession and assurance. On Sundays when baptism was celebrated, the sacrament was part of “Time with Children” so that the children could be present. (This was a constant tension because many people argued that the sacrament needed to follow the proclamation of the word. However, the opinions were just as strong that the children needed to be present for baptisms.)

After “Time with Children” parents escorted the youngest children to activity rooms (with adult volunteers) for the remainder of worship. Parents rejoined worship as soon as their children were settled.

Members of the task force discussed their own experiences and memories—positive and negative—of growing up in church. Parents talked about their concerns for their children’s learning about and participating in worship. All talked about their own needs/responses for worshipping God and growing spiritually.

From the conversations and readings the task force proposed and implemented several changes and new ideas. The most significant step in this change was rethinking when the children could and should be present in worship.

Children learn by watching and imitating adults and by projecting themselves into imaginary worlds. Our liturgy with its rich mixture of verbal and nonverbal, of colors and sounds and smells and gestures, is the primary source of nourishment for our adults, and should also nourish our children.⁴

The youngest members of the church were missing some of the most active, participatory elements of worship: prayers of the people, the Lord's Prayer, passing the peace, hymns, the offering, the anthem, the doxology, the benediction, and, especially, the Sacrament of Communion.⁵

Therefore, rather than having the children leave before the sermon, the children now join the congregation following the sermon during the hymn. In the almost two years of the changed order of worship there have been many anticipated and unexpected gifts.

After Sunday school the children (through first grade) meet together with volunteers to read and to play. Parents no longer gather their children after Sunday school, arrive in the sanctuary for twenty minutes, return their children to the activities area, then return to the sanctuary where the sermon has already begun. Rather, the children simply continue their time together until the volunteers bring them to the sanctuary.

Beside eliminating traveling time, parents talk about how much more they can worship. Parents, whose children are settled upstairs, can more fully concentrate on the liturgy and especially the reading of the texts—which they had often missed. Many have commented on how their focus can be on the Word and on the message of the sermon without having to “shift gears” from running back down the stairs and feeling uncomfortable about disturbing other worshippers. Then, as one mother said, after being able to listen and concentrate she is ready and glad to welcome her children to worship.

Because FPC uses a lectionary-based curriculum for Sunday school, the children have heard the stories/texts which the rest of the congregation has heard during the first part of worship.

“Time with Children” led to many discussions in the task force. Many educators and ministers have concerns and questions about this part of worship because it can be a time of mini-sermons to adults or using children to “get to” the adults. Too often the children's sermons include concepts and language which simply are not age-appropriate.

Though a number of folks encouraged the elimination of “Time with Children,” many parents felt strongly about the importance of this time for the children and the minister(s) to be together, that “Time with Children” bears a significant relational aspect. On any given Sunday “Time with Children” may be a conversation with the minister or staff member, an interpretation of the day's Bible story from the children, the children's choir singing, an impromptu dance (senior minister Joe Harvard led that one day!).⁶

Most especially the sacrament of baptism now follows the proclamation of the word and the children are present. Each time baptism is celebrated, the children and the rest of the congregation hear the promises together. The children hardly wait to be invited to gather around the font—they are there first, usually creating a challenging obstacle course! The children are the first to greet the newly baptized members.

One Sunday when the children gathered at the font just before the baptism, a little boy who was visiting was invited, with the others, to look inside the font.

"It's water!" he exclaimed.

"What did you think would be there?" he was asked.

With sincere and wide eyes he replied, "Blood."

After "Time with Children" everyone joins her/his family. Worship together continues.

Children through first grade join the rest of the congregation during the hymn after the sermon. However, families know children of all ages are welcome for the whole worship service, that the children are not required to be in the activity room. Additionally, several parents bring their youngest ones, ages four and younger, following the sermon, although remaining in the nursery is an option. Families discern the needs of their children.

How has this order of worship enhanced the lives of the congregation?

Several parents relate stories about their children saying prayers or singing the doxology at home simply from having heard the familiar tunes and words over and over in worship.

One mother came up excitedly after worship one morning describing how her two-and-a-half-year-old had prayed the Lord's prayer with the congregation that day. This is the same little one who sings, "Praise God the farmer..." which may be a pretty good image! She also creates her own words to the doxology tunes and, in talking about Communion, refers to the "Jesus bread."

Parents express the significance for them of having their children present. There are many stories of specific ways the children participate including the children's sense of when to listen, when to sing, when to stand. Some of the sweetest gifts have been notes or drawings from the children to people whose names they have heard in the prayers as being sick or being at home. (Cards are available in the pews for anyone to send a note to someone in the congregation.)

During Advent this year, one family who had wondered if their daughter would ever take an interest in worship described their joy when this six-year-old "suddenly" began to follow the bulletin and stood on the pew between her parents singing every hymn. The children have learned several Taize songs which we now sing during communion. The children's voices have led the rest of the congregation in learning these hymns.

The congregation as a whole is more welcoming with the children...and their parents! Rare are the complaints about noise or disruption. Since the children now come in, gather at the chancel, then go into the congregation, other church members have made connections with families in seeing the children's faces and knowing "who goes with whom." Additionally, children are with their families to visit with others after worship which enhances the relationships in the community.

Children want to come to worship. Parents have reported difficulties on Sundays when their children learn they are not staying for worship after Sunday school! One parent observed that the children are now excited about coming into the sanctuary. In the past the children approached "Time with Children" as the last stop on the way out the door!

Prior to the change in order of worship, an educational blitz occurred. A special letter went out to the congregation describing the process for the task force and session

and the changes that were in store. For two weeks folks at any gathering—circles, adult classes, committee meetings, fellowship dinners, etc.—heard about the plans and had the opportunity to ask questions and make suggestions. The strong message to everyone was the commitment of the church to making worship meaningful for the entire congregation including children.

A four-evening seminar was held for families to explore and learn about worship together. One evening included a “tour” of the church through offices and throughout the sanctuary, behind the pulpit and even “playing” the organ with the minister of music.

Children’s activity packs (C.A.P.s) were developed to provide tangible, worship-related “activities.” All the C.A.P.s (extra strength freezer baggies decorated by the children) are in the foyer. Each child has a C.A.P. with his/her name. In addition to the children’s bulletin crayons and other simple hand items are in the packs.

Lest C.A.P.s seem more distraction than aid, one young man—present for the whole service—was busily coloring his bulletin. He turned to his mother to tell her the preacher was “talking about the same thing we talked about in Sunday school.”

For the past two years FPC has celebrated Pentecost with a real birthday party for the church. Glistening soap bubbles filled the air (outside!) and a big birthday cake was shared by all. Last year, children made red and white streamers that dance in the wind...even inside the church building.

Children belong with the worshiping congregation because the gospel is for people of all ages.⁷ The church has a responsibility for imagining and creating forms of worship and education in which all members of the congregation can participate.

Notes

¹ (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 406.

² Gretchen Wolff Pritchard, *Offering the Gospel to Children* (Cowley Publications, 1982), 141.

³ David Ng and Virginia Thomas, *Children in the Worshiping Community*, (John Knox Press, 1981), 52.

⁴ *Offering the Gospel to Children*, 143.

⁵ Churches still debate the issue of when children should begin participating in the Sacrament of Communion. Many of us grew up receiving first communion at the time of our confirmations. Though that is an important memory and may have confirmed the “importance” of communion, the theological understanding of God’s unconditional grace given for all may get sidelined. Some assume that young children do not “understand” what communion “means.” That underestimates children’s abilities to “understand.” Everyone is invited to Table. That includes baptized children. One parent spoke of how her young son slips off to the church kitchen after worship on Communion Sundays to “get a little more of the bread.” He has not told her why and it is not about getting an extra snack! She says that he thinks there is something special about the bread that he can’t yet explain.

⁶ FPC is constantly challenged by when to have children’s choir. Currently, the older children’s choir meets prior to Sunday school and the youngest children’s choir meets between Sunday school and the activity time prior to worship. For those who participate, choir is a very important time for learning the biblical stories and messages. FPC is fortunate to have a very energetic, creative minister to children. She also directs an interfaith choir for the city called “Children Singing for Peace” in which a handful of the FPC children participate.

⁷ *Children in the Worshiping Community*, 18