

# The Liturgical Participation of Children in Small Churches

The theology behind it, and how it can be done

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## Abstract

*The concept of the priesthood of all believers underpins the participation of children in worship. Children who are part of the life of the church are regarded as members of the priesthood; as such they have pastoral and ministerial gifts to share. Like adults, they need to worship God; and as catechumens, they need to learn about faith.*

*By being enabled to participate fully in the worship service, children have an opportunity to share some of their gifts; they are encouraged to engage in worship; and they learn the patterns of the faithful.*

*This paper explores these convictions, partly in theory but primarily in the practice of one small congregation, the South Yarra Community Baptist Church. This church has, over the last few years, developed ways of more fully involving the children in the liturgy without dumbing it down. Rather than add children's segments, we have looked for ways that the liturgical experience could be enhanced for everyone by adding additional symbolic actions to the existing components of the liturgy, and then inviting the children to lead us in these actions. Most of our small group of children are now regularly present and participating for most or all of the service.*

## A Little Girl

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who was sick. She had spent her week drifting around the house and dozing in sunspots. Hot with fever, she had slept away the afternoons; her throat was sore; she was quiet as a mouse. But on Sunday, at church time, she got up, got dressed, and got ready to go out. 'But you're sick,' said her parents. 'We're staying home.'

'What?!' she wailed, 'I want to go to church!' She plumped herself down at the front door, and hollered and yelled.

'Darling,' said her parents, 'Dear heart, sweetie pie, no...' but their pleas and entreaties fell on deaf ears. There she sat, their cross little girl, weeping and wailing and begging to go to church. Her parents didn't like to see her cry. 'Whatever shall we do?' they asked.

'Church!!!' she yelled.

Her parents looked at each other, and sighed; then they packed their bags. Seeing this, the little girl quietened. Her parents popped her in the car and off they went; and they were only a little bit late.

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I wish this were a more common story. Too many kids I know hate church, or at least are indifferent to it; rather than racing out the door, they are being dragged along by anxious parents. But I want to

tell you a story of a different way, of a church that has found ways to incorporate kids into the worship service and has discovered that, to everyone's surprise, the kids now LOVE going to church.

## **Background**

It's no great secret that churches across the board have found it difficult to involve kids. In small and under-resourced churches, the challenge is very obvious. Most large churches can pay to make the problem go away: people are employed to educate and entertain the kids while the adults get on with the worship service. These kids grow up, most of them leave the church, and we wonder why. But of course they didn't grow up in the church; they grew up in the Sunday school program while we did our thing.

But alternatives aren't easy to find, and so wealthy churches often continue to pay for big programs. But what of the small and under-resourced churches? Most small churches try to copy the patterns of big churches, perhaps hoping that that way they'll become big, too! In many areas this doesn't work too well, and this is especially obvious when it comes to kids. When you've only got a few kids, it's hard or impossible to create age-appropriate programs and activities; and it's hard or impossible to find people to run the program. If you only have 15 to 30 adults at a Sunday service, you may have nobody in the congregation with the gifts or interest in running the kids' program. Even if you do have people, taking them out of the service, when there are so few of you in the first place, is a high price to pay.

At our small church, even the idea of running a Sunday school was creating lots of tensions. Currently, our average Sunday attendance fluctuates between 20 and 35 people; of them, between 6 and 11 of those people are kids. So often, over a third of all attendees are children. Can you imagine the effect if half the congregation left partway through the service every Sunday to attend or run a Sunday school?

In the past, we tried various options. We hired babysitters; parents took the kids out; and so on – but nothing felt right or worked well. Now, most of our kids stay with us during what is admittedly a long and verbal service, and most of the time most of us are glad that they do!

## **Why Include Children?**

Fundamental to the way our church practices worship is the notion of the priesthood of all believers. We take seriously the idea that every participant in the life of the church has pastoral and ministerial gifts to offer the congregation. We take this concept further than most by explicitly claiming that, whether or not they are baptised (and in most Baptist churches they are not), children, too, are members of the body of Christ. As such, they have gifts to share, as well as a need to worship God. When they are taken out of the service to go to Sunday school, no matter how excellent the activities, their gifts are being withheld from the full worshipping community of the church, and they are no longer worshipping God as part of the body of Christ.

We believe too that faith is not something we get when we have learned enough doctrine, but is a gift from God, encouraged and nurtured by exposure to the patterns of the faithful. Children and other catechumens obtain this exposure primarily by standing alongside the faithful as they engage in the practices of faith; the patterns they learn and the relationships they build there will carry into all other aspects of church life. And so for all these reasons, we now include our kids in the worship service.

Of course, including them hasn't been completely straightforward. Our children have surprised us with their ability to respect the event, but their presence has raised the level of background noise and sudden unpredictable movement, and that has bothered some people.

Over and over, though, the adults' concerns are driven by a misunderstanding of what public liturgy is. Most of us have grown up assuming that the liturgy should be performed as well as possible so that nothing draws our attention away from God. We also often assume that it is purely an aid to private devotion. Although public liturgy and private devotion inform one another, they are different activities and should occupy different time-slots.

The public liturgy is about offering the communal gift of the entire congregation to God. Everyone has to be part of it, or it will not be the offering of us all. If in our pursuit of perfection we exclude the contributions of those who are messy or chaotic or only semi-articulate, then we are offering something which may be beautiful to human eyes, but it is beauty achieved at the expense of God's little ones. And in our church we are not willing to make that sacrifice.

### **Putting it into Practice**

So for their sake and ours, children are full participants in our worship service. To enable this, we had to interrogate our worship practice and find ways to enable their participation. Overall, we added more music and movement; we provided activities for them to do during the service; and we changed some of our views on what constitutes a worshipful stance.

We didn't want to turn our service into one of those 'family friendly' affairs. But we learned that a good service can be accessed on many levels – and that a formal liturgy is particularly suited to children. There are several reasons for this. For one, we use the same liturgy for a church season: Advent, Lent, Pentecost, or common time. The only things that change within a season are the readings, a few prayers, the sermon and the hymns; a large part of the service repeats each week. Many of our prayers are sung, whether they are short repeated refrains or the more complex creeds and Lord's Prayer; this makes them simple to memorise. The use of repetition – spoken, sung, structural and visual – makes the service easy to learn over time, whether or not people can read. My own three children have all known and belled out parts of the liturgy from the age of two or so.

The older kids have spoken parts during the service; and most kids join in the congregational spoken and sung responses. But that's all very verbal. The kids also needed to do things, things which were relevant, important and valued.

So Nathan sat down with the service booklet, which includes the texts of our liturgy; went through it page by page; and tried to imagine what could be happening in movement and action on each page. He came up with a series of actions which enhance the service. So, for example, early in our liturgy we have a prayer invoking the presence of the Spirit which is spoken with a sung refrain. Now, as that prayer is spoken and sung, there is a dancing procession around our central altar. We have a processional cross, a processional kookaburra (the kookaburra being Australia's avian symbol of the Holy Spirit), and dancers waving symbolic flames made of sparkly fabric. Our youngest child recently started joining in the dance, often going around in the opposite direction to the rest and at twice the speed, but that's all good. The Spirit blows where it will and you cannot know where it is going. The flame dancers appear twice more, as the Bible is processed for the readings, and during the preparation for communion.

When the gospel is read from the centre of the room, it is now surrounded by children holding icons of the four evangelists. When it's time to set the communion table, the children line up at the side table, bow before the elements, and then carry them to the central table and set it out.

We changed the way we do the prayers of the faithful. Rather than prayers spoken aloud by seated members of the congregation, we began using prayer stations. After an introductory exhortation to pray, there is about five minutes for people to move around between various stations to offer prayers for different kinds of needs. These stations invite both a prayerful symbolic action and some words. For example, there is a symbolic brick wall, and people are invited to pray by pulling a brick from the 'wall of oppression' and writing a note or drawing a picture-prayer about a situation of conflict, injustice or oppression. [LA] The words or pictures can then prompt other people's prayers; it is not all private devotion.

As well as during this five minute period, it is not uncommon to see a child, or even an adult, go over to one of the stations and offer a prayer at some other point during the liturgy. The station of a garden and small animals, where we pray for the earth, is especially popular.

During the ten minute silence and the sermon, we provide an activity sheet which presents a paraphrase of one the lectionary readings, and some suggested responses. The kids can choose to do one of the suggestions, or they can develop an activity of their own. We explicitly name the open option to allow for an authentic response to the story.

For these activities, they have access to art and other materials for them to use in the sanctuary during the service. I've prepared a handout listing some of the ideas. We have certainly found that the activity sheets have helped children tune in to the preaching because the older kids regularly come up to the preacher after the service and ask for more detail about a story, or make some other clear response.

As well as giving the children specific roles and activities, we aim to make the service accessible on many levels. For example, we try to engage the different senses, thus broadening the modes of communication. Each week we smell incense, see candles being lit, hear the melodies of deeply familiar songs, and taste freshly baked communion bread.

Our worship space is decorated with religious imagery and icons, giving children (and adults) lots to look at and stimulate their imagination when their attention wanders. They are also free to move about quietly and light candles, hang up prayer flags, play in a sand tray or sit under the communion table. Although we discourage our children from thundering around, and occasionally need to remind them that they are not the centre of attention at this time, we don't require them to sit still or maintain absolute silence.

In summary, in our search to find ways to integrate children into the worship service without losing our formal style, we added additional symbolic movements to the liturgy; we provided quiet activities for children to do during the time of silence; and we changed some of our views on what constitutes a worshipful stance.

## **Final Observations**

Our liturgy style is very formal, which many of us once thought of as 'adult'. However, our children have surprised us with what they are capable of. For example, as I mentioned above, we have a ten minute period of silence every week. We were not sure the kids could manage this, but as we talked

about expectations and provided quiet activities for them to do, the kids showed us they can keep silence, too. We adults have also learned that sitting in silence means learning to embrace noises in the background as signs of creativity and life.

For the most part, having them in the service has been a great gift. We included them primarily for their sake, but the rewards have been abundant. In their freedom of movement, children have given us permission to move around the service more freely ourselves. In their curiosity and absorption, we have been challenged out of our distraction and encouraged to pay attention. In their hugs and in the way they welcome people in each week, they have modelled loving hospitality and care. In their absolute trust, they demonstrate very real faith.

At times, the actions of one child or another has shocked and challenged us, even brought us to tears. One memorable Easter, a four year old girl threw herself at the foot of the cross and sobbed, a poignant reminder of the women who stood watch while Jesus died. We name these actions as gifts, even when they feel like interruptions and challenge our preference for quiet participation.

The presence of children in the service has reminded us that Jesus came to us as a real little baby, who cried and wore nappies and kept his parents up nights; and that, as a grown man, Jesus welcomed little children, encouraged them to draw near, and instructed his disciples to become more like them. Our children have been a tangible reminder of what it is to be childlike, and, no matter our age, have challenged each of us to explore what it means to be a child of God.

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