

People of All Ages Doing Faith Together: Stories from Sanctuary

Alison Sampson, from Sanctuary for South Yarra, 3 December 2017
(1st Sunday of Advent: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9)

To paraphrase the great missionary, the Apostle Paul, "I greet you as God's own children, and wish you all the best." When I moved to Warrnambool last year, a good friend of mine described it as my own great missionary journey. So tonight I will channel the energies of the missionaries who spoke at churches in my childhood, and bring stories of more of God's children, and a slideshow. My name is Alison, I'm your church-planting pastor, and I am very grateful for the administrative, liturgical, and other supports that South Yarra provides. I'm here in Melbourne this week because I'm doing an intensive on the spiritual life of children. Basically, I'm checking if I'm doing things right, because the congregation I now serve is two-thirds kids. As you can imagine, the service—and my work—have a very different energy to South Yarra. And yet, if you were to visit, things would probably feel strangely familiar.

For many years, I have had a passion for intergenerational faith formation. Intergenerational faith formation is a concept rooted in decades of research which shows that everybody's faith grows when people of all ages worship and 'do faith' together. This passion is one reason why the kids stay in the service at South Yarra: I pushed that barrow pretty hard while I was here! But early last year, I stumbled across a loose network of people in the southwest of Victoria who had left church. They were people who described themselves as spiritually dry, even shrivelled up, and most of them had children. I ended up moving with my family to begin something new: and that something was centred around a worship service.

But intergenerational worship is relatively easy when you have thirty adults and five to ten kids. How does it work when you have twenty-five kids, and fifteen adults, on a Sunday? How do you meet everyone's needs? That was the question I was faced with. I couldn't do a long, wordy service, while everybody sat quiet and still: the toddlers would go berserk. Nor could I do table church or small group models, because the kids didn't want to sit at a table for any length of time, and of course they hate it when adults talk too much. Meanwhile, services which focus entirely on the needs of children are inadequate for most adults; and talkfests don't feed them properly, either.

In other words, this group needed a service which encouraged participation and movement. From my experience at South Yarra and my reading, I knew that a formal liturgy provides the repetition and ritual that help children feel safe, and enables even non-readers participate. It gently holds chaos when the kids get a bit out of hand, and it provides the depth and richness that adults need, without alienating or excluding their kids.

So that's what I introduced. Our service is a lot like South Yarra's, only it's half the length, it's a bit more direct, and I lead more from the front. We worship mostly in the round and, drawing from Matthew 18:1-10, when Jesus placed a child in the midst of the disciples and bade them pay attention, the main children's area is in the centre of the circle. However, we also have playful prayer stations dotted around the room, and so the kids constantly flow in and out of the centre; I use various techniques to draw kids in at different points of the service.

One of those techniques is for gathering around the table. It has become a question and answer session, and goes a bit like this. I invite all who would like to, to come and stand around the empty table. Then I'll ask:

"Mercy, who can come to the table?" And Mercy will find the place in the booklet and speak the invitation: *Whosoever will may come ...*

"Blade, what goes on the table first?" *Bread.* "Great, go get it, and set the table."

"Andy, what prayer do we say over the bread?" *Blessed are you Lord ...*

"Arwen, who are we?" *We are the body of Christ ...*

"Maereid, who are we gathered with?" *With the whole realm of nature around us ...* and so on.

There's nothing like a pop quiz to keep people on their toes. I try to ask the right kid the right question: a three-year-old or another child who can't read might be asked to name the elements and set the table; a strong reader will be asked to recite the blessings and prayers. A few weeks ago, two young boys decided they wanted to read aloud for the first time, which surprised and delighted us all. Then we had to ask them to stop and give someone else a turn!

Another difference is how we do the Scripture readings. We sing the Psalm, then listen to just one of the readings for the day. This isn't read from a lectern. Instead, I sit on the floor and tell it in my own words, using very simple objects—blocks, pieces of material—to enact it. Then we wonder about it. People of all ages ask questions and make comments, and then they scatter to various stations to 'do more wondering'. Those stations include a sand tray, a dolls house, a block corner, and a trolley with stationery, craft materials, and puzzles; and it's not unusual to find some kids have re-enacted the story and wrestled with it using the materials to hand.

The initial wondering can lead to great comments. Since Pentecost, we've been focussing on the Hebrew Bible readings. One week, we heard how Abraham's servant sought out a wife for Isaac. He travelled to the home country, prayed, and met Rebekah at the well. After the telling, I wondered aloud who in this story was the most faithful. "The servant!" said a young girl. She noticed that it wasn't the named ancestors of our faith, but an anonymous servant who prayed and told everyone about

God's faithfulness. I reckon she was right: but it was a challenge to those of us who expect faithfulness to be rewarded with name recognition or other honours.

Another week, we heard about Jacob tricking his dad into giving him the blessing meant for his brother. It made the kids furious, and one of them yelled, "That's totally annoying!" It was the most honest response to grace I've ever heard. Yet another week, in the first chapter of Exodus we met a pharaoh who was ignorant of his nation's history. He didn't know why the Israelites were welcome in Egypt, and he became afraid of them. So he spread vicious propaganda about them, and made their lives miserable. "That's like Donald Trump!" said an older kid. "Or Pauline Hanson," said another. With kids like that, who needs a preacher?!

Their observations and connections open up all sorts of conversations. Intergenerational faith formation is not about adult 'experts' transmitting faith to 'ignorant' children, but nor is it about 'pure and innocent' children showing 'corrupt' adults the way. I am sharing stories of children tonight since, in this world, children's voices are least likely to be heard; but it is a two-way street, with people of all ages wrestling with faith together. Sometimes an adult will say something that nurtures the faith of a child; sometimes a child will say something that challenges the faith of an adult; sometimes the very act of worshipping together requires both adults and children to plumb new depths of patience, humility, and grace. One way or another, when people of all ages worship and do faith together, we all grow.

This happens because we are all children in God's eyes—and because, when we meet over sacred stories and bread, Christ has promised to be with us. At Sanctuary, a child first pointed to this. We had just heard the Emmaus story, when two disciples encounter the Risen Christ on the road and recognise him in the breaking of bread. A nine-year-old who was at church for the first time rocked back on his heels. "Wow!" he said, "They met God!" After talking more about it with him and the wider congregation, I preached: and of course it took me ten minutes to say what he had said in four words.

I preached it anyway, because I wanted to thump it home: that is, that people who gather each week around bread and stories are in the presence of the Risen Christ: that is a promise. And they are slowly transformed by this regular encounter: and that is something else first observed in our congregation by a child. At our one-year review, we invited contributions from people of all ages, and the first person to speak into the group of 40 people was a different nine-year-old. He said, "No matter what happened during the week, when I walk in here, I feel like myself again - and maybe even become a little bit better ... For me, God is a feeling, and I feel it here. It's the easiest place for me to feel close to God." He reminded all of us that being in God's

presence, and feeling close to God, helps us feel at home in ourselves, and can help us 'become a little bit better'.

As a pastor, then, my work is not to transmit faith: for that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead, my job is to curate spaces where people of all ages can become aware that they are close to God, and give them shared language and stories which will help them recognise and talk about this presence. The context and conversations can help ignite faith; and so it's incredibly encouraging to see the kids pointing the way to us all.

Of course, it's not all plain sailing. It's a church plant, it's hard work, and I'm under-supported and underpaid. At times I feel like the little red hen, whom no one much will help as she sows, harvests, and grinds the wheat, and bakes it into bread—only to have someone say, "But I want bagels!" and another, "Well, I want raisin toast!!!" The service style is not everyone's cup of tea; but, because the formal liturgy meets many of their needs, particularly those of the most vulnerable, we stick with it. And it is bearing fruit. One kid said to me recently, "Sometimes we sing the church songs with our friends in the school playground." Another said, "I was out walking. Suddenly I remembered a Psalm—and I sang it." And a school mum reported back to me that she had overheard a group of girls—some churchgoers, some not—having a robust discussion about prayer. Thanks to the repetition and ritual, things I learned here at South Yarra, things are going deep: and both children and adults report feeling nourished and sustained—even transformed.

This Advent, I am reflecting on how it is in very ordinary places and through very ordinary people that the Risen Christ continues to be made manifest in the world. I am an inner city person, and I miss the hustle and bustle and the social bubble of the inner north enormously. But three hours south west of here, in a far flung corner of the earth, is an old hall cluttered with op shop chairs and granny rugs. If you visit, you'll find prayer stations fashioned out of second hand tea trolleys and teapots, world maps and post it notes; you'll meet a congregation tumbling with snotty toddlers, spotty teens, and kids with disabilities, all brought along by hypermobile, overcommitted, burned, and very tired adults: and there, even there, God is with us. We are not at the centre of the world; we are not at the centre of anything; but, there, even there, Christ is being born.

Moving to Warrnambool was an enormous leap of faith for us. I never wanted to leave Melbourne, and we had to trust that what felt like a call was indeed the work of the Holy Spirit. But we're now sixteen months in, and I can paraphrase the Apostle Paul again and witness to you: We have been enriched in every way. God is faithful and absolutely worthy of all your trust. So in union with the wider church—including us

most weeks in Warrnambool— I invite you to stand with me and affirm this trust as we sing the Apostles Creed. Ω