

Children behaving in church

We go to church to worship, not just to be polite.

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One day during the coffee hour after church I mentioned to someone that I enjoyed the fact that there were more children in worship than there used to be. “I think it’s important for them to be there,” I said, making conversation.

My conversation partner agreed. “Yes,” she said, “it’s important for children to learn how to behave in church.”

“Behaving in church.” Is that what we are doing? Maybe it is. We sit and we stand at the right time. We are silent when we are supposed to be silent. We speak when we are supposed to speak. We sing (or we don’t sing if we don’t know the song.) We listen during the sermon or our minds wander. We shake the hand of the pastor as we leave and say, “Nice sermon, Pastor.” That is how we behave in church.

Or, if we are children, we sit still and try to fidget as little as possible. We color in the pew, or we go elsewhere to have an age-appropriate experience. Sometimes our parents help us follow along a little. But what is most important is to behave, not make a ruckus, not run up and down the aisles, not shout or say something inappropriate. You know, behave in church.

There's behaving and then there's worshiping. We come to church not simply to behave but to worship. To worship means to listen and to speak, to sit still and to stand up, to sing and to pray. To worship is to participate. I want children, in all of their fidgety, wondering uniqueness, to participate in worship.

When I was a little girl, I sat next to my dad most Sundays. I looked up the hymns in my hymnal, and I sang along with my dad when he sang the hymns in his baritone voice. He participated and I wanted to participate too. He said the prayers and I said the prayers. I learned to worship by worshiping with him. And I loved the liturgy because he loved the liturgy. I still do. I love knowing the parts by heart, when to sit and to stand and to participate.

But that is just a sliver of what worship can be. In our church now, we do something that we would never have done in my church growing up. It would not have been considered proper. Sometimes we invite the children up during the last song, to play musical instruments. We let them help with the benediction by putting their hands up in blessing. We let them know that worship is an active verb.

One Sunday, something out of the ordinary happened. Just before the end of the service, a woman in the congregation asked for prayer. She said she had gotten a text from her son that her grandson was in the hospital.

So we did something that might not have been considered proper when I was a little girl. We invited her to come forward, and we prayed for her grandson. And I asked if anyone in the congregation would come up and surround her while we prayed and help us pray for her grandson.

A few adults came to the front of the church. All of the children came up to pray. Because they had learned how to behave in church.

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