

Children are the church

We miss a lot when we don't invite children's presence and participation in worship.

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One of my best memories from early in my ministry is of the Sunday when two little girls decided they wanted to sit in the front row without their parents. They weren't sisters, they were friends. Both sets of parents were in the building, sitting discreetly just a few rows behind them. The opening hymn was from a supplemental hymnal. If I recall correctly, it was a rousing contemporary song called "We Are the Church."

We all stood up, including these two young girls, and we all opened our supplemental hymnal. And they held their hymnals high, singing at the top of their lungs: "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together."

Yes, we were.

Now granted, this was sort of a special scenario. This was not "Beautiful Savior" or "A Mighty Fortress is our God" or "Now Thank We All our God." This was sort of a child-friendly hymn, something we included once in awhile if it fit the theme of the day. And this was one of those congregations where the children were in worship (all of it, including the sermon) every single week. This has become rare, for a lot of reasons: families are busier, and a lot of churches are holding education hour and worship at the same time. Even more, I hear that there are some churches that hold separate worship services for children and adults. You walk in, and the children go one direction, for "children's church," and the adults go another direction, for adult worship and teaching.

On one level, I suppose this makes sense. Children and adults need different things. Children can get bored in an adult-oriented worship service. And adults can be distracted by the presence of children. Children don't always behave perfectly.

Sometimes they cry. Sometimes they fidget.

Yet I think about those two girls, sitting in the front row of their small congregation, singing at the top of their lungs. And I think about the congregation who was fortunate enough to experience their presence at worship.

It is my conviction that we worship best when we worship together. And children benefit by being with us. Even more, we benefit by being with them. My current congregation went through a long spell when the presence of children in worship was rare. But in the last two years, a few families with children have arrived, and we have done some things to intentionally involve them in worship. Some of the children help usher with their parents. Some of them read a lesson out of a children's Bible. A few older children help with the Call to Worship. Occasionally one of the children has provided a drawing to go along with the scripture or sermon theme. And sometimes we get out a basket of rhythm instruments, and invite the children to play along. I sometimes feel that I have just scratched the surface of how children can be active participants in worship, and help us remember that we are all active participants in worship. We do more than sit still and listen. We sing and we pray, we stand and we sit. But we do even more than that.

Sometimes, I think, it takes children to help us remember. One Maundy Thursday I invited people to come up and have their feet washed. The only people to come forward? The children. The next year I decided to make it a little more user friendly, and I invited everyone to come up and have their hands washed instead. Who came forward? Again, the children. And when the children came forward, a few brave adults followed them.

And then there are the unscripted moments that children provide. These help us remember that although liturgy has a flow and a proper order, it is never JUST proper. There have been times when a few young girls spontaneously started dancing in the aisle during the final hymn. And a small child often says, "yay!" at the end of a song she likes. Once, during a children's message, when I told the children that Jesus was going to die, a little girl gasped! The news of it broke her heart, and our hearts broke a little, too.

Children also belong in church because they are watching us. When we worship together, they are finding out what is important to us. I remember standing next to my dad every week in church. I still can hear, in my mind, my dad singing harmony

on the hymns. He loved to sing. I do too.

Some people will tell me that they want children to be in worship so that they will learn to "behave" in church. But, as for me, I want children to be in worship because they are part of the body of Christ, and their presence enriches me. I want children to be in worship because they sing loud, say "yay!", share the peace with enthusiasm, and play the rhythm instruments. I want children to be in worship so that they will know Jesus, and know the people of God, and know that every single one of us, all ages, has a place here. I want children to be in worship so that they know they belong. I want children to be in worship because they bring joy, and honesty, and their true selves.

I want children to be in worship because we are not complete without them. We need all the voices, including theirs. Especially when they say "Yay!"

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