

CHILDREN OF THE WAY OR CHILDREN IN THE WAY?

*The Place of the Worshipping Child in the Worshipping Church
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Children at Worship– the dilemma

A frequently expressed concern in Church circles today is that only a small number of children and young people actually engage in the life of the congregation. These are the only numbers I am going to quote but in 1951 there were around 402,000 youngsters in the Sunday School system; in 1981 around 112,000. In 2011, we do not even keep numbers. There are folk memories of the days when it took nine double-decker buses to transport children on the annual Sunday School trip, and there is a longing for those days to return. But there is no attempt to see them in their historical context, or to analyse why they were successful, nor indeed whether they are indicative of success. So today, many a nominating committee will ply applicants for a vacant charge with anxious questions as to how he or she will attract more young people into the Church, without any clear indication of who will provide a nurturing base for said young people once attracted. Not all kirk sessions today have developed a strategy or a policy for their ministry to young people. An increasing number of churches have appointed salaried youth leaders, and in the best situations that is good and bears fruit, but sadly it has sometimes been an attempt to purchase a solution to a problem for which a more radical approach is required.

I would suggest that the Church of Scotland has a rather ambivalent attitude towards children and young people, longing to have them, particularly present at worship, but rather uncertain what to do with them when they do come. At this point I should probably admit that I may end up producing more questions than answers in the course of this paper. What is important, however, is that rather than mourning the passing of a so-called 'golden age', we accept that there are questions here which need to be answered. In particular we need to look at what happens on a Sunday morning, and how

that fits in to contemporary lifestyles.

My own background prior to offering myself as a candidate for ordained ministry was in children's ministry. I worked for ten years as a Presbytery Sunday School Adviser, was responsible for writing SS material for the Board of Parish Education and was involved in the devising and delivering of education and training programmes at local and national level. In the 1990s, I was a very junior part of a working party from the Board of Parish Education which produced for the General Assembly the second of two reports on Children and Holy Communion. It resulted in the Assembly voting to enable children and young people to be admitted to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper provided certain criteria were applied. For some of us, that was a significant moment. In the working party, we had reached the stage of defining what it meant to be a communicant member of Christ's Church. But, as we worked, we found increasingly that what we were actually defining was what it meant to be a baptised member of that Church. I think at that point many of us began to recognise and to grapple with (some of us for the first time) many of the issues raised by the Church's ambivalence in its attitude to children and its dealings with them. I sometimes wonder if, in that much quoted passage of Jesus blessing the children in Luke 18:16-17, the disciples were projecting onto the Master their own feelings about children that, nice as they were, they were a bit of a nuisance and a distraction and that Jesus too would find them tiresome. Perhaps it was ever thus.

Children – the history

I want to deal with the present and the future rather than the past, but perhaps it is important to acknowledge how we got to where we are. Children are not the 'Church of Tomorrow'; they are part of the Church of Today. This is not the place to debate infant baptism, but our branch of the Church is committed to it. Most will agree that the sacrament of baptism is the appointed instrument of entry into the Church and it signifies that we are received into the covenant with God and clothed with the righteousness that is Christ's; we are made new. Reformed understanding has never been that this was an adult thing taken and adapted for use with children, but was essentially relevant for children as well as adults and that, indeed, Jesus recommended that adults should strive to become as children if they wanted to enter the Kingdom. If we are to consider worship as the focal point for

the faith community and an appropriate activity for all of God's people, the Church, then we must of necessity consider the place of the baptised child within that. The argument will be made (and frequently is) that true worship can only come out of an understanding of what God in Christ has done for us. The counter argument has to be that if worship is a community activity, then the earlier it is begun the better. It has been said that capacity for faith is more important than the exercise of faith. From the earliest stages in his development, a child has a capacity for using his eyes to see, even though the full capacity for interpreting what is seen has not been developed. If worship is encounter with God, then those who would worship him need to be led into that encounter and full participation will be arrived at gradually. Children have an almost unique capacity for worship which can be nurtured and encouraged. Perhaps part of the problem for some of us is how we measure that capacity. There are many different ways of measuring.

Many years ago, and before I was ordained, I was invited to become chaplain to a special needs school with some thirty children with what were then categorised as *moderate to profound* learning difficulties. Many had no language. Some had only minimal sensory faculties, and I was asked (by a head teacher who was not a professing Christian) to provide a service of worship for them every week in term time. It sharpens the mind wonderfully to have to contemplate communicating God and Gospel with such very limited recourse to language and understanding. I fairly quickly realised that God could only become real to them in these thirty minute sessions if I could communicate how real he was to me. To work with such children one has to develop new ways of measuring. I believe we had some very worshipful moments in which it would have been hard not to think of God as present and engaging. There were even from time to time, what could almost be described as sacramental moments although, of course, no recognisable formal liturgy was used. I found it a life changing five years which played a part in developing my understanding of the place of children in the Church. Those of you who know a little about gardening may find the metaphor of engrafting useful when talking of certain elements of baptism. When a graft is taken, a slip, a length of stem is let into the stem of the rootstock or parent plant and bound into it. Almost at once the slip starts to receive and take up nourishment from the parent plant. In time it develops buds and leaves and flowers and becomes a living part indistinguishable from the whole. From

the moment it is bound in, life through the parent plant begins. Growing into worship should be a huge part of that life in Christ.

Looking back, perhaps it is necessary to understand the place of children in earlier society. For obvious reasons, children mattered in a family, but centuries ago they were seen rather more as miniature adults and of no great value until they matured. Children appear to have attended ordinary diets of worship and no special provision was made for them. But why should there be if there was little concept of childhood as a separate state? These small adults counted for more when they were old enough to begin work on the land, and then in factories and mines as the industrial revolution came in.

It was obviously considered important that they were admitted to communion. Records of the early post-Reformation Church in Scotland in this regard are scant, but it does appear that from quite an early age, certainly as young as nine years, baptised children were admitted to the Lord's Table as communicant members. Prior to the celebration of communion it was the responsibility of the fathers of family units to gather the family together and ensure that, when visited by minister or elders before communion, they could say the Lord's Prayer and the commandments and answer questions on the catechisms (indeed there exist special versions of the latter for use with young children prior to communion.) John Craig, a minister of the Church in the early years of the Reformation, described the Church as 'the communion of those united in Christ' and that included children. The Church is uniquely the Church when it sits at the table, and God is no respecter of ages. Comprehension however, did not appear at that time (at least not in the way it was to become) to be a prerequisite for inclusion at the table. This was not of course the case in the highlands and islands.

But while this dealt more or less adequately with believing families, there came a growing concern for the poor and the unchurched. Thus, the early 1700s saw the beginnings of the Sunday School movement, with pioneering work done by Robert Raikes in England and men like Alexander Mair of Forteviot in Scotland. It was intended to provide schooling for those children who could not attend school during the week because they were working, and their financial contribution to families was important. So Sunday Schools were set up to teach them to read so that they could read the bible. Initially,

worship and Sunday School accounted for the whole of the Sabbath for such children. However admirable both the aims, and what was achieved by Sunday School, it did signal the start of the separation of the worshipping child from the worshipping adult, thus creating a gap that has never been bridged.

Children – the immediate past

Until, say, the 1950s, children went both to church and to Sunday School, but by the latter part of the century the longest a child might expect to be in church in any week would be for the first 12-15 minutes of the service. Ministers were even scolded gently by Sunday School leaders if the first part was too long, thus curtailing the lesson. I am not in any way denigrating most of what was done. The best Sunday Schools were excellent and provided an age-appropriate community of faith to which children could relate. Some first class material was produced and used over the years by the Churches and others. The expression work was often of the highest quality, and in many of Scotland's more deprived areas, Sunday Schools provided a place of refuge and stability for children who had quite a hard life. One also saw tiny rural Sunday Schools where the teaching was occasionally by folk with little other experience of children, and the love of Christ was expressed and shared. But if you bring children into a church building, addressing and involving them directly for only a few minutes, and then put them out of the building and shut the door behind them, then quite simply the unintended message is that, whatever it is that goes on in the place after they leave, it is not for them. The sense of alienation can be even greater when the SS meets in a building a distance away from the church. What began to happen also as we know, is that the system lent itself to parents bringing children to church by car and dropping them off to be collected an hour later, so you could fulfil your baptismal vows (after a fashion) without ever going into the church building. And so now, in the church which once required nine double-decker buses for the SS trip there are only nine children on the Sunday School roll – mini-rugby permitting. We regret that. Sadder still, we realise that when they do come to church for a family baptism, it is slightly foreign territory to them and they are not sure quite how to behave. If we are honest, while we want them, many of us prefer them on our terms – in pews and well-behaved. We need to remember that these same parents are the adults who themselves

never really graduated from the Sunday School system, never really came into a state of adult commitment.

Children – how will they have faith?

Is all lost? ‘Will our children have faith?’ If so how will it come about?

The question was asked by an American theologian, John Westerhoff III, writing in 1976 in a book of that name. He defined four stages of faith. The first he called **‘experienced faith’**, which is basically imbibed – almost like mothers’ milk, and is almost an unconscious faith. It comes through the influence of believers around you in home or church and is generally absorbed uncritically and unquestioningly. The next he called **‘affiliative faith’**, the kind of faith which makes a person want to stick around the faith community because it is not an unpleasant place to be and one can relate to what is being experienced. This is rather in the way that a child sticks around brownies, or mini-rugby or Boys’ Brigade, or Sunday School, accepting and being accepted. In this stage there is now an element of choice in that the child can be where she wants to be, a well-exercised choice. The third he calls **‘searching faith’**. This is the beginning of a more pro-active stage in which one begins to wrestle, to question, to argue – and sometimes to reject. With children and young people we might associate this with teenage years and the question ‘But why ...?’ when ‘because I say so’ no longer suffices. But this should never be seen as a negative thing. Even Jacob wrestled with God and many of today’s young people wrestle with faith questions we barely knew existed at their age, as many of us who have served as chaplains in secondary schools will testify. The final stage he calls **‘owned faith’**, owned because (under normal circumstances) it is the culmination of the other three and is the stage at which someone hearing the call of God in his or her life is able to respond positively saying ‘Yes, this is for me’. There is acceptance though hopefully the searching and wrestling never cease completely.

This for me is an entirely workable model – though no one should be under the impression that it is achieved by all in a space of 18 years. (Many adults appear never to grow out of the affiliative stage.) But if we accept his thesis, it would seem to be important that children and their parents are welcome in the Church community from the very start and that the child is enabled to

go through these stages within the community of faith ... and that it includes Sunday worship. Let me illustrate this.

Children – at worship today

Let me tell you about Robert. Robert first came to church when he was ten days old. He came in a papoose, a sling on his mother's front. Aged three and held by her, he was able to hold the collection plate as she took it round the pews when on offering duty. Aged four or five, he took the plate round for her, carrying it himself. Soon he graduated to handing out the hymn books and greeting people at the front door of the small rural church of which he was a member (as well as putting them back and tidying them up afterwards). Aged seven or eight, he was taught by the Session Clerk to ring the bell. He loved that. In the service he sang lustily because that was what those around him were doing. He never quite got to reading the lessons, though a couple of the girls did, but that was never his particular gift and it was theirs. When it was practical to have something approaching a Sunday School, they all attended. He was fully part of that small intimate church family and still is, aged twelve. Time will tell whether that approach was sound but he knows he is valued.

Let me tell you about Ruaridh's Easter Day worship in a medium sized town. There was an almost-packed church for the second diet of worship, planned with young families in mind, but those present probably ranged from 8 weeks to 80 something years. The shape of the service was traditional though the conduct of it was – let us say – 'relaxed'. Some children sat with parents, some sat together at the front where they reckoned the action would be. The praise and the prayer language were both dignified and appropriate, and the address or message was in three parts, each aimed at a particular age group, but with no part inaccessible to the other groups. The atmosphere was worshipful, but parents with small children felt free to slip out if the occasion arose and it can be said that the service was peaceful. In that congregation children obviously feel at ease and at home in the sanctuary. At other times, they do both Sunday School and Messy Church, both successfully.

These two examples show that it can work, but it is not easy. But these

situations are a long way from the uneasy truce in which a diffident, even unskilled, minister is aiming a children's address at one toddler, one five year old, and a protesting eleven year old who would really rather be somewhere else. Some of my colleagues say that in that case they would really rather be *somewhere else* as well. It is also a long way from the play corner situated inside the sanctuary, from which babies and toddlers engage in an uneven competition with the minister for whom the radio mike is not necessarily an advantage. I parody – but only slightly! When you add to this the fact that the most beautiful and inspiring of our sanctuaries ancient and modern are sometimes amongst the least young-person-friendly, the situation can become even more dis-spiriting. Robert at least has been able to move through the first two of John Westerhoff's stages of faith and has felt at ease and valued in his faith community, as have the children who were in North Berwick on Easter Day. Can that be said always to be the case? I fear not.

Children – solutions?

Notice how often children are key to what is happening in scripture, and ask whether we are prepared to give children their place in today's faith community? Scripture reminds us that in the prophecies of Zechariah, called to the sacred hill in the restored Jerusalem, are children playing, and men and women so old that they need the use of sticks to walk. We have plenty of the latter, but the former? 'It may seem impossible to those who are left', says the Lord, 'but it is not impossible for me.' There is the touching partnership when God spoke his message directly to Samuel, but it took Eli to guide him as to what he should do. We have the boy David taking on Goliath when grown men were running scared. And, in the New Testament, it was a child whom Jesus placed in the midst of the disciples when he wanted to indicate a right kind of approach to membership of the Kingdom.

In our parishes, do we give children their place? Many congregations are trying hard. Many churches today are experimenting with after school clubs, lunch clubs, and holiday clubs, which take the place of the traditional Sunday School and reach unchurched children as well as the baptised. These are certainly working, but do not address the basic question of what should happen in Sunday worship. And they should certainly not be seen either by parents or Kirk Sessions as an alternative to being part of a worshipping

community which acts as part of the entire nurturing process.

There are people who are trying to make worship more child friendly, but success has been patchy. Many churches in the vanguard of the SS movement attempted to introduce family services once a month. It was a compromise but sadly some teachers, children, and families saw it as a reason to have a Sunday off and anyway – social patterns especially at weekends have changed radically in the last half century. There is also a tendency by some (and not entirely without justification) to see all-age-worship as ‘kiddy-worship’ with an accordingly lowest common denominator. All-age-worship can be banal, but does not have to be. It has to be said that often it is churches with a more relaxed approach to liturgy and orders of service who are more successful in incorporating children in worship, particularly in those congregations who offer what is now termed ‘blended worship’. In those congregations with a more formal approach to liturgy, children are often given specific roles to play, in choirs, as readers, candle-lighters, in liturgical dance and drama, as servers and this is helpful. This seemed to me to be more in evidence in Churches in the Anglican Communion and it certainly happened in the PCUSA. There is not a great deal of evidence to suggest that the problem is being resolved though in some places it is at least being addressed. It is important however not to resort to tokenism.

Perhaps here in Scotland we have to reassess what we believe is taking place in worship. A considerable amount of work was done in our own Mission and Discipleship Council in the form of a pack made available called ‘The Child Friendly Church’. Much of it seems like plain common sense, but that’s not always as obvious as it might be. The scope of the package is broader than just worship, but if worship is to be at the heart of what we do, then there must be a more holistic approach to the whole question.

The Child Friendly Church starts with the ethos of worship in our churches and congregations. Think yourself down to about three feet high. Just how welcoming (or not) is the gathering area at your church and what about that phalanx of elders against the table in the vestibule? Quite a number of churches now include young people in the welcoming team, which gives value both to the greeters and those greeted, young and old. Then there is the worship space itself. In the CFC pack, congregations are invited to consider how friendly their sanctuaries are. This is not to set neo-gothic

against 1990s new build, or pews against chairs, or the richness of stained glass against clear glass with light flooding in. It is not so much to do with one style of architecture or furnishing against another (our homes are all quite different) but it could be about looking with fresh eyes at how our buildings can enhance the offering of worship which we are able to make within them. Even adults can find church buildings intimidating. Try for warm, welcoming, and worshipful – probably even in that order. People need to be incorporated physically as well as spiritually into the worshipping community.

Beyond actual services my original home congregation ran a 'Calling all Parents' series of evenings in the early 1970s. Christian parenting is a real challenge (parenting itself is a massive challenge) but by and large the Church leaves parents to get on with it unaided. Could we do more to help?

One fairly recent venture has been Messy Church which is proving hugely successful in many parishes and is reaching whole families who have little or no church connection (so it is missional). The average Messy Church lasts a couple of hours and is held in a weeknight or on a Saturday or Sunday, usually monthly. Each session has three main components. The first consists of seemingly informal activity work and teaching, and is scripture based. The second component is a meal, preferably a proper sit down meal. The last part is a period of worship (praise, prayer, and 'preaching') related to the earlier teaching. It is truly intergenerational. It is attracting families who are largely un-churched and who might not feel at ease with conventional worship. It is high-maintenance and very labour intensive, but it can involve whole teams of helpers whose skills are not necessarily teaching or preaching, and that is a good thing to be able to do. But those engaged in running it are frequently being asked whether it is bringing more people into church for conventional services on a Sunday morning as if that had to be the main goal. It's not. Which brings me neatly round to the conclusion of this paper.

Children – The Future

Many congregations have lost at least one if not two generations from worship. It is unrealistic to expect to find a strategy with which to reverse that. In any case, because of the disparate nature of congregations of the Church of

Scotland, what works in tiny Tweedsmuir may not work in St Giles', and what is right for Castlemilk, may not be right for North Berwick. But the matter must be addressed prayerfully, and the best solution worked out. It is not impossible, it just requires faith.

Personally, if I were starting again and it were practical, I would try to aim for all-age or inter-generational worship as the norm. But that would need to include an examination of the whole ethos of the sanctuary and how 'all-age welcoming' it is (and that is not solely to do with children). It would necessitate a close look at the shape of the service and language and liturgy used, and how all ages can be involved in a natural way without tokenism. That might be less simple for the most traditional of our churches but, again, it is certainly not impossible. As I stated earlier, it has worked where worship is already less formal, but I believe it is possible to achieve this without form and dignity and order being lost. The much-maligned children's address might have to go, but it might be replaced by something better and also less patronising or paternalistic.

For all the reasons given above, I personally feel that the Sunday School in its traditional form has had its day, but some may wish to keep it going. In America, adults and children do go to Sunday School for age-appropriate teaching, but that is before the main diet of worship which they then all attend together. This may be difficult but not impossible in our culture.

But what Messy Church and other similar initiatives such as Fresh Expressions seem to be saying quite clearly is that, for very many people, the traditional diet of formal worship is not meeting their needs, is not enabling them to encounter God in a meaningful way, is not communicating adequately the challenge of the Gospel message. We might be saddened by or even impatient with that, but I doubt it can be denied. And if there ever was a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, I doubt whether there can be now. We need to take a much closer look at today's society and the part faith plays in people's lives.

Our children and young people are a living important part of the whole Church. They should be *children of the way*, not children whose presence we say we want but whom we see as an intrusion when they do come around. It is a challenge, but not an insuperable one. The question is: 'Are we prepared

to try to resolve the matter, or do we simply hark back incessantly to what we believe we have lost?’

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