Children at Worship: The Church of Today

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If I didn’t see it happening, week after week, I probably wouldn’t believe it: children of all ages—children noted for short attention spans—sitting through the entire Sunday worship service, for the most part content to be there and only in a few cases getting restless before it is over. During the sermon many of them, knowing they will not be able to understand or concentrate on that “adult” part of the service, will snuggle up close to a parent, perfectly happy with what may be the only time all week they have really found time to do just that! It feels good—both to kids and parents. And what better place to do it?

Is this worship? It recalls what Albert Schweitzer said about the example his parents set. Although he couldn’t understand all of Sunday worship, he knew from their attitude how important it was. Martin Marty, in a recent address to the American Guild of Organists Advisory Board, cited as his favorite description of worship the German theologian Roman Guardini’s words, “pointless but significant.” Marty continues, “Out of this encounter comes freedom, ennobling of life, meaning, and a new readiness to regard the sacred in human life and dignity, in nature and human productions.”

How should the presence—or the desired presence—of children influence our worship planning? Should we throw out the historic liturgy and “come down

to their level”? How often we think it is our responsibility to decide that children
and youth are incapable of good taste! Masaru Ibuka tells of a Japanese kindergarten
where music of all kinds was part of the environment. At the end of the year a
survey revealed the children’s all-time favorite to be Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony!
Second in the standings was pop music. But least appreciated of all were songs
written especially for children! Children—especially very young children—are
open and eager to appreciate all kinds of music. No prejudices have yet been
formed. Experiencing all types of music throughout their childhood, such children
will have little or no bias against traditional worship music as they grow older.

As the steamroller of “alternative worship” threatens to sweep away every-
thing in its path, we must seriously weigh the importance of traditional liturgy to
today’s children. Can ancient words or music really speak to them? (Can the Bi-
ble?) Will our children be poorer if they never experience the historic liturgy?
Have anthropologists changed their minds, or are we still formed and shaped by
our rituals? In communist Russia the liturgy was thought too inconsequential to
even warrant prohibition. As one Russian Christian said, “They didn’t realize that
in the liturgy we had all we needed to preserve our faith.” In his view it was the lit-
urgy that kept the church alive throughout the communist rule—and ready to re-
assert itself when the iron curtain fell.

Music and worship forms of the past should be used today—like Shake-
speare and the Bible—not simply because they are old, but because they can still
speak, still uplift, still inspire.

A few years ago at a meeting of church musicians, James Frazier, former as-
sistant director of the Worship Center, Archdiocese of Minneapolis and St. Paul,
spoke about the theology of music itself in proclaiming the word: “The God of
Gregorian Chant is a different God from the God of ‘easy listening music.’” What
did he mean? Is there really theology in music itself? Perhaps the title of J. B. Phil-
ips’ book Your God Is Too Small expresses it. Is it possible to have liturgy and music
that is “too small” to express or be worthy of proclaiming our great and awesome
God and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? For each musical setting we use, may
we ask ourselves, “What does this music say about this text? How does it help to
‘express the inexpressible’?”

As Carol Doran, a church musician, and Thomas Troeger, pastor and Chris-
tian poet, have written in their book Trouble at the Table, “There is a hunger for
mystery that will not go away. If the church fails to satisfy this hunger by treating
worship as nothing all that special—all we need to begin worshiping the Creator of
the universe is a cheerful ‘Good morning’—then people will seek mystery in other
practices.” Troeger and Doran tell of a woman whose house had been robbed of
absolutely everything. She told the thieves to keep it all, except for a small ring—
worth nothing on the market, but priceless to her because her father had bought it

3Carol Doran and Thomas H. Troeger, Trouble at the Table (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) 1.
for her as a novelty at a state fair—a tangible sense of the past. The authors conclude:

What is true of individuals is also true of communities. They need to hold on to the memories of the past in order to understand who they are. If they forget, then they will lose their identity and sense of purpose. The Hebrew poet who was exiled to Babylon gives poignant expression to this insight: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!” (Ps. 137:5).

Children who grow up in a church which ignores its history and heritage are thus deprived of important roots for their faith. As Marty says,

There is too much passion in the human story, too much need to find the why behind the how of life, too much thirst for myth and story, rite and ceremony, for people to see themselves reduced to rationality alone, as if they were computers with legs. They have intuitions, memories, hopes, communities, traditions, and affections that tell them to look for more: for signs, signals, significances. Praise and worship express this.

In the Minneapolis suburb where I live, many of our neighbors are Jews. As we take our Friday evening walks through the neighborhood, we are awed as we pass the many Jewish homes and see each family gathered in its dining room, candles lighted, men and boys with heads covered, celebrating the beginning of the Sabbath. At Passover the streets are filled with cars in front of these homes as friends and relatives meet together to celebrate that high feast which has kept these people united over thousands of years and thousands of miles of separation. Some of them aren’t religious at all. But they are Jews! And they know it—because of these rituals. And the importance given to children in such Jewish rites as Bar Mitzvah could serve as an example to all Christians.

Consider the common rituals of family life: “Happy Birthday to you...Make a wish and blow out the candles!” The Christmas tree may be fake, but it must be there! And poor indeed is the family that doesn’t develop its own little rituals along the way and observe them faithfully. The neglect of such rituals may even contribute to the breakdown of the family in today’s world.

These are rituals we don’t mind a bit. Why, then, should liturgy bother us? Has it lost its meaning? Compared to a two-hour Bar Mitzvah liturgy recently experienced—most of which was in Hebrew—our Christian liturgy seems short indeed, and most meaningful! Has liturgy failed us, or do we too often fail it?

Not long ago a church musician poured out his frustration and despair over conflicts in his congregation over worship styles. This congregation sought to solve its worship problems by having two distinctly different types of services, one traditional and the other “alternative” or “contemporary.” As has happened in other places, the congregation was soon divided into two camps, politically as well as in their worship practice. They even brought in a mediator to try to bring the divided groups together, without much success. A pastor in a Twin Cities suburb

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4Ibid., 115.
who resists risking a split in his congregation uses an interesting term for their common worship. He calls it “non-apartheid.”

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Troeger and Doran’s book is that nowhere do they advocate having two different worship services in a congregation. The emphasis is, rather, on finding an eclectic type of balance in which each part of the body can gain from other perspectives—each gives a little and shares a little. And the body stays together! Never do they say it will be easy, but always that it will be worth what it takes!

The Corinthians of the early church had similar problems! Speaking about 1 Corinthians, Doran and Troeger point out that chapters 12 through 14 deal with this very subject. Chapter 12 talks about the church as the body of Christ and the importance of every part of the body and its need of every other part.

Chapter 13 is the famous passage about love...It is the centerpiece of an argument that extends into chapter 14, which stresses again and again that the crucial test of the various ways we worship is whether or not they build up the church. The context of chapter 13 suggests that one of the things Paul has in mind when he writes those words is how people treat each other in dealing with their differences over worship—differences that were threatening to tear apart the church at Corinth: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.”

It has been exciting for me as a choir director of all ages from three and up to observe the interest of little children in liturgy. Somehow, they don’t expect to understand it all. Perhaps that’s part of its fascination. But as they come to worship week after week with their families, a goodly number are proud to be able to participate in more and more of it. Twice I have heard Janet Reno, Attorney General of the United States, speak out on behalf of children, ages birth to three. She is convinced that if the deteriorating aspects of our society are to be turned around, we must begin with those children. Will we listen? What will it mean to us in the Christian church?

For older children the most solemn services of the year—Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, for example—are sometimes the most meaningful, possibly because they make the greatest use of visual imagery. There are parents in our congregation who would never leave their children at home for Good Friday Tenebrae, and those children present are among the most awed worshipers. They will probably carry these memories of Jesus’ sacrifice with them throughout their lives. The very atmosphere of this service—the visible ritual—communicates to them in ways that mere words could not do. For children the visual aspect of all worship may need to be strengthened.

An old Chinese proverb says: What I hear I forget. What I see I remember. What I do I know. It is my experience that what they see in church (and what they hear in its music) can keep children interested much more than any spoken words. But the proverb’s “punchline” is about doing. Here is the place that children's

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6Doran and Troeger, Trouble at the Table, 150.
choirs can play their most important role. At least from age three, a child involved in a choir program can “do” worship in a very special way. Learning first the shortest liturgical responses (amens and gospel acclamations, for example) and then some of the shorter hymns and hymn refrains, these children can begin, even at that tender age, to become not merely participants but leaders in congregational worship. How they swell with pride at actually teaching the congregation a new hymn or liturgical song! There is much evidence that children involved in such a choir program—one which goes far beyond “special music” or entertainment—are most likely to remain involved in congregational worship as they grow older. (After all, church choirs were practicing “small group ministry” long before the church growth movement discovered it.)

But history alone cannot provide adequately for worship. The Bible urges us to “sing to the Lord a new song.” What should that song be in today’s church? Is quality still a priority? Many of us have assumed that we cannot have both quality and accessibility to the stranger, but it is imperative that we find ways to have both. Composers like John Rutter have proven that this is possible. His music is so well constructed that even the most elitist of composers find it hard to criticize. And yet, its melodic content and “familiarity” are instantly attractive to just about everyone. Genuine folk hymns which have stood the test of time (as opposed to “pseudo-folk”) provide a treasure of such material.

Marva Dawn has a rather unique way of evaluating new music. When asked to speak at a youth convention on the subject of rock music, she approached the topic with the question, “What kind of people do we want to become, and what kind of music will help us in that becoming?” She was shocked by teenagers who insisted that the questionable words and morals of some rock music didn’t affect them at all; all they listened to was the beat. But an older friend who had said the same thing in his youth later admitted that his morals really were damaged by such music.7

But what is quality and how can we know it when we see it? Are there any objective ways in which we can determine quality—either in the words of our worship services or in the music? I believe there are.

May we agree that the ideal text for worship has both theological and literary values which may defy mundane “explanation”? That is, it may say different things to different people at different times, thus bearing up well under much repetition. Our penchant for explaining things tends to “box in” the liturgy. It must mean just this and nothing more. Why should we so limit the boundless possibilities of the Holy Spirit?

As for the music, there will always be differences of opinion on what constitutes quality. But may we insist with the great composer and educator Zoltan Kodaly that in worship as in their musical education, “Only the best is good

enough for a child”? That “best” certainly implies that the composer has done his or her homework, or that a folk tune has stood the test of time.

This is not to imply that no attempt should be made to plan worship which will have some measure of instant appeal to children. Perhaps the film Aladdin could serve as a model in one respect. Reviewers have praised it for its two levels of enjoyment. Much of the humor, lost on children, is most appealing to adults. On the other hand, there is so much for the children to like that they are not the least put off by what goes over their heads. But such a combination may be even rarer in worship than in the field of entertainment!

Is there any greater challenge for seminaries than this? Is there anything more important than keeping our children and youth worshiping? (They are not, as we sometimes call them, the “church of the future.” They are a vital part of the church now.) Is there, for example, a course for seminarians in speaking a child’s language— including what symbolism has meaning for children? Clergy can’t be blamed for shortcomings in this area if they have had no such training. And may we avoid what some have termed liturgical minimalism? Ritual and tradition can be brought to life in exciting ways which will help children of all ages—and those who “become as” little children—not merely to tolerate worship, but to actually celebrate it each week!

“Let the children come,” said Jesus, “and do not hinder them.” He even said that it would be better to be drowned with a millstone around our neck than to cause a little one to stumble! But much worship really says, “Unless you become as an adult, you shall not enter the kingdom of God.” I like Marva Dawn’s translation of “as a little child”: “only those who play.”

The most controversial question regarding children in worship may well be participation in holy communion. Philip McLarty in his book The Children, Yes! makes a most convincing argument for opening the sacrament to all. He writes,

On the surface it would seem to many that to include children at the Lord’s Table is an affront to serious faith. “Why, they can’t possibly understand what they are doing!” some would say. Yet, for others, to exclude the children...seems much the same as excluding them from the kingdom of God. These persons would counter the argument by saying, “Children aren’t the only ones who fail to comprehend the mysteries of the Sacrament.”

Eugene Brand tells us that infant communion was practiced in the early church for the first ten centuries. Only in the eleventh century did quarreling about it begin, and that was for fear that they might choke on the bread. Does holy communion depend on our understanding more than baptism? Must it go with confession, or is God able to use it as a means of grace even for baptized infants?

8 Ibid., 202.
And who is to decide when children, of varying degrees of intelligence and understanding, are ready?

The loud sobbing of my own grandson as he returned to his pew empty after accompanying us to the altar a few years ago has haunted me ever since. I couldn’t have blamed him if he had never wanted to go to church again. A recent conference on children in worship speculated that when today’s child becomes a teenager, he or she may ask one of two questions:

Why should I want to continue in this congregation where I have been a second-class citizen since I was born?

Or:

How could I ever want to leave this fellowship where I have been so loved and welcomed, and a full participant ever since I can remember?

Would today’s teenagers be different if they had had the blessing of the Lord’s supper throughout all their growing years? If we believe in the power of that sacrament, how can we justify denying them this gift of God?

In summary, then, may we hold up at least five important factors regarding children in worship:

1. the possibility of worshiping with family from infancy
2. importance of the visual arts
3. text and music of quality—both tradition and “new song”
4. children’s choirs as meaningful involvement
5. holy communion available at an early age

While it may never be easy, involving children in exciting worship each week is worth all the effort it might take.