Involving children in worship and ministry

David d'Lima JP BTh Dip Ed

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... a little child will lead them (Isaiah 11:6)

Children are part of the church

Christians are recognising the fact that children are part of today's church and should not be treated simply as "members of the future". Yet we sometimes exclude children from the life of the church - separating them from adults. In contrast, our Lord Jesus challenged the anti-child mentality of his disciples, as we read in Matthew 19:13-15:

> *Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.*

Luke (18:16) gives the further insight: *Jesus called the children to him ....* Today our Lord continues to call the little ones to him, and this challenges the following examples of anti-child thinking in the world and the church:

- Some married couples deliberately remain childless;
- Wedding invitations sometimes specify: *No children please*;
- Youngsters are sometimes kept away from funerals;
- Parents are under pressure to have small families;
- The very antiquated principle that *children should be seen and not heard* still influences society, though it completely denies the needs of children.

Our Lord calls us to encourage the little ones in relationship with him. He said: *"do not look down on one of these little ones"* and *"do not hinder them..."* (Matthew 18:10; 19:14), but in church we are in danger of greatly frustrating children as our services tend to be adult-oriented, rather than family-friendly. We are at risk of hindering children - if they gain little sense of participation, or if they are not encouraged as stakeholders in the church and its purposes.

Encouraging children to worship

To help encourage older children to stand and sing in worship, churches could have youngsters as the backing vocalists - in support of the worship leader. Perhaps sixteen children could share four microphones. Those children could include peer "opinion leaders" who serve as role models, so their example may encourage other children to stand and sing.

Younger children may be encouraged to participate within worship by using percussion instruments. Young children greatly enjoy coming to the front of the congregation to select instruments they will use in worship. Children of almost any age can enjoy employing shakers, tambourines, maracas, castanets, bongo drums, cymbals or triangles. Like the children who gladly shouted *"Hosanna"* (Matthew 21:15) youngsters can march around waving banners, flags and streamers, if these are made available during worship services.

Movement and music can be the children's response to the Psalmist's instruction: *Praise him with the tambourine and dancing, Praise him with the strings and flute, Praise him with the clash of cymbals ...* (Psalm 150:4-5). Instead of complaining about crying babies, grizzling infants or boisterous youngsters we should recognise that such behaviours accord with the pattern of creation, and we should therefore affirm David's declaration to God: *"From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise"* (Psalm 8:2).

Family-friendly worship

We may wish to make worship times more family-friendly by meeting everyone's need at the same time. For example, the meaningful lyrics of hymns favoured by older Christians can be made pleasing to youth and children by the use of percussive arrangements. Worship can also become more family-friendly by limiting the repetition of choruses; adults may appreciate repeating a chorus several times, but children prefer to sing a song once or twice only, then move directly to the next song. This will help families that struggle when praise times are too lengthy.

Integrating adults and children over morning refreshments

In some churches the children and adults take refreshments separately - the children have theirs at Sunday school during church, while the adults have refreshments after church. If this separation can be eliminated, adults and children can be integrated in the sharing of drinks and snacks after church.

Giving children ministry responsibilities

Scripture affirms the role of children participating within worship, ministry and even within the civic arena, as in the following examples:

- The girl **Miriam** re-united the infant Moses with their mother (Exodus 2);
- **Joshua** *had been Moses' aide since youth* (Numbers 11:28);
- **Samuel** served God - *a boy wearing a linen ephod* (I Samuel 2:18);
- A **servant girl** encouraged Naaman to gain Elisha's help (II Kings 5:3) and may be known as the little girl who influenced the pagan civic authority;
- The baby **John the Baptist** was *filled with the Holy Spirit* (Luke 1:16);
- A **boy** helped Jesus by offering his small loaves and fishes (John 6:9);
- **Paul's young nephew** spoke up to a Roman commander (Acts 23:19) and may be regarded as the little boy who went to see the pagan civic leader.

Since children can help shape the church's vision, as in Acts 2:17: *Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions* ... our quest should be to involve children in worship and ministry, helping them in their relationship with God, in fellowship with others, and encouraging them to participate more fully in the life of the church. So let us adopt the principle that *If a child can do it, a child should do it*, and ask ourselves: *Can our children participate more?* We can involve children in church every week by giving them ministry responsibilities as follows:

- Choosing songs and helping plan the services;
- Decorating the interior of the building, particularly for special events;
- Designing and producing news bulletins, and updating the church website;
- Preparing and serving the elements for the Lord's Supper;
- Cutting pieces of fruit for morning refreshments;
- Welcoming worshippers as they enter the building;
- Circulating news bulletins, or hymn books, and making announcements;
- Operating the computer projection system and video equipment;
- Assisting at the sound desk with audio mixing, recording and uploading;
- Collecting the weekly offering, praying over it, and counting it;
- Reading Scripture aloud to the congregation;
- Operating the coffee machine, or serving drinks and biscuits;
- Farewelling people at the conclusion of the service.

The unintended benefit of children's participation

As children participate more fully in services this may have the wonderful unintended result of helping encourage their unbelieving relatives to come to church - something they might otherwise never consider!

Continuity of ministry to children

In many churches the Sunday School or Children's Church closes during term holidays, leaving children without the usual structured input and ministry, whereas the adult program continues as normal. This may provide a welcome break for those who teach the children, but it also may reveal a faulty view that ministry to adults is more important than ministry to children.

The difficulty of persuading adults to teach Sunday School (during term or in the holidays) or in kids' clubs may reveal a problem in our thinking in the church - that children's ministry is really not very important. But rather than accept the difficulty of locating adults to teach children, our challenge is to enthuse, train and equip more people, so the children continue to receive ministry. A renewed enthusiasm for children's work is also needed to sustain and encourage adults who minister to children. Our challenge is to remember to thank those involved, support them, and pray for their valued work.

Churches could run services that bless all ages, so children and adults remain together for the service. This may require a "children's talk" instead of a sermon, along with puppetry, drama, video input etc. This may feel strange to adults, but they will benefit from seeing children in action, as we must *receive the kingdom of God like a little child* (Mark 10:15) and we must *change and become like little children* (Matthew 18:3), as (Jesus said) *their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father* (18:10) - who has *hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children* (11:25).

In fact we honour God as we set aside the perfecting of our own act of worship, to bring children closer to the Lord Jesus. This is clear from our Lord's teaching: *Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me* (Mark 9:37), and as he declared (according to the Apostle Paul in Acts 20:35): *It is more blessed to give than to receive.*

FamilyVoice AUSTRALIA
4th Floor, 68 Grenfell St, Adelaide SA 5000
DDL@familyvoice.org.au familyvoice.org.au
Phone: 1300 365 965

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