

# The Children Will Now Leave

by Rev'd Canon Dr Andrew Sheldon

Joyce Ann Mercer has written that “the children will now leave will not be found in any prayer book but it is an accepted and oft-used liturgical phrase. “

Now in the interest of honesty and full disclosure I must state that the words, or at least words that reference the same ideas, ‘the children will now leave’, do make their way into the service leaflet at the church where I exercise leadership. In other words I, too, am dealing with the legacy of a phenomenon within the church whereby the primary gathering of the community is characterised by the segmentation of individuals on the basis of age. Now, in order to ensure that some of you don’t spend the next little while finding ways to justify this practice and convince me of the same, be assured that I do believe that it is appropriate to practice age-based faith formation and that this may include age segmentation on a Sunday morning. But I will come back to that.

In the meantime what I do want to remind you is that intergenerational worship, or all-age liturgies, are not a modern innovation but were the normative practice of the church for centuries; children and adults worshipped together. Furthermore another recent phenomenon is worship as a quiet solemn affair. In mediaeval times worship was a decidedly raucous affair with the gathered community doing its thing while the priest got on with his thing up front. There really was a seamless transition from marketplace to church.

The practice of segmentation has as its genesis the emergence of the Sunday School. Now Sunday School was initially a missional effort to young labourers who could not access regular schools, and not a means for churches to provide faith formation for their young members. And when, in time, it did become the mode for religious education for members it was generally held before or after worship. In the Anglican tradition this was often Sunday afternoon, in Evangelical circles Sunday morning before the worship service. Thus, Mercer again, “the educative aspects of children’s participation in the church did not replace children’s participation in other aspects of congregational life and practice”. Most significantly for this address Sunday School did not replace children’s involvement in worship.

Over time, however, the sequestered nature of Sunday School, or Church School, did create a separate sphere for children in the church, and became a means of separating children from full participation in other practices of the congregation and most significantly participation in congregational worship.

There were a number of reasons for this – in no particular order.

### **1. The church entered its respectability phase.**

This 'respectability phase' is what William Willimon has called the emergence of worship as a quiet solemn affair.

The main task of the worshiper was to sit still and listen quietly. And this seems to have been constant in all traditions – Protestants would listen quietly to lengthy sermons, Anglicans adopted a cathedral model with pageantry and ritual that was to be observed and hardly participated in. Even the Pentecostal church I grew up in was a sit still and be quiet kind of place. (My pastor as a child was fond of saying that noisy children in church were like New Year's resolutions, they must be carried out quickly!)

Needless to say that worship as a sit still and be quiet affair was hardly amenable to children's participation.

### **2. A particular view of childhood and children's capacity to do spiritual work.**

In the early 1960s Ronald Goldman, a British religious educator who wrote from a theologically liberal perspective, pointed out perceived problems associated with how children understand Scripture. He said because children do not think in the same ways as adults, they will often re-form biblical concepts and terms into meanings that make sense to them. Most of us have read or heard quoted the "cute things" young children tell their parents they learned in Sunday School. For example, "Hallowed be thy name" was remembered and quoted at home as "Harold be thy name." Because "hallowed" was incomprehensible to the child, the child changed it, intentionally or unintentionally, into something that made sense to her. Goldman concluded "that the Bible is not a children's book, that the teaching of large areas of it may do more damage than good to a child's religious understanding, and that too much biblical material is used too soon and too frequently." Goldman cautioned religious educators to not teach theological abstractions too soon. Not surprisingly, Goldman's research and conclusions grabbed the attention of Christian leaders around the world and the idea that children could not do serious spiritual work took hold.

### **3. It's a sin to bore a child.**

The inevitable consequence of worship as a serious solemn affair, and the apparent incapacity of children to do serious spiritual work, was adult anxiety about childhood boredom.

And so, not surprisingly, the church responded with Sunday School as entertainment; a way of 'not boring' kids. As such faith formation was often mediated by puppets, communicated by vegetables, and accompanied by catchy music.

Thus gradually congregational worship as a multigenerational experience of the whole community came to be replaced increasingly by an hour in which adults participated in

worship while children engaged in separate and presumably more entertaining religious education activities.

There were two other developments that accompanied this shift that are worth noting.

The first is separation of children's education into the female sphere. Children's ministry became women's work because the ordained were almost exclusively men and they would confine their work to adult 'higher education', and work with children was not considered worthy of the attention of the highest level of church leadership. The irony is that even as women assumed leadership at every level of the church it was still the case that those women did not consider ministry to children to be their concern – and that children's ministry still continued to be the domain of other women. What is currently troubling is not so much that children's ministry continues to be dominated by women – although I do believe that children and men would be well served by an increase male presence – but that children's ministry is still not seen as work worthy of the highest levels of leadership in the church.

The second is the almost exclusive use of parents of children as the providers of children's faith formation. Now this is problematic in all sorts of ways. It's like saying wives should be responsible for men's programmes etc. But mostly it is important to note that many of the negative initiatives around children's ministry were a result of parental anxiety.

Nonetheless even as children were, and are, increasingly marginalised in the church, residual 'guilt' around this phenomenon did lead to other, perhaps unhelpful, developments.

### **The children's 'sermon'.**

(See William Willimon, *Children's sermons are not the answer* Circuit Rider November 1981)

The children's sermon became popular in the 1980's as a way, an attempt, to include children in corporate worship. In other words a good intention.

This little sermon for little folks would be short and concrete and often object lessons would be used in order to accommodate the limits of young minds

But, Willimon noted, the problem with children's sermons are that they are not sermons and they are not for children.

Not sermons because they violate scripture in order to make it fit some moralistic point the leader is trying to make – usually some variation on the theme of being good boys and girls so God will love you. (I remember the last children's chat I ever gave. I was trying to explain the atonement by referencing movie night in the Sheldon household and the implications of bad behaviour when I realised that I no longer believed in the substitutionary theory of the atonement or the children's talk!)

Children's talks by virtue of their length and audience invariably are moralistic, individualized, paternalistic, and trivial.

And they are not for children. In the first place sitting on the chancel steps listening to an adult talk – because even if props are present it still is a talk – is not the preferred mode of learning for children. The experiential kinaesthetic mode preferred by children is lost to a cognitive and verbal approach.

Indeed most children's talks aren't for children because they are almost transparently for adults. For example I have seen a picture on the cover of a diocesan magazine dedicated to children's ministry showing an adult giving a children's talk. This picture speaks a thousand words. The children are looking down or around but are decidedly not paying attention. And the adult is looking over the children's heads and is wired with a remote microphone; so that the 6 children can hear her?

Children's talks are too often for adults. The children are talked over or used as props for the entertainment of the adults. The sincere answer of a child elicits laughter ensuring that she will never speak again. The paternalistic moralising is a way for leaders to assure parents that they are doing the work of ensuring that junior is learning what it is to be good Christian – a good boy. And the children's talk alleviates concerns that we are not doing anything for the children. There, we involved the kids, now they can go to Church School and we can get on with real church.

Willimon tells the story of a preacher giving a children's sermon. He opened it by asking the children "what has a bushy tail, eats nuts, and lives in a tree?" An 8 year old boy answered, "God". The congregation erupted into unholy laughter, and the children's sermon came to an abrupt end. After the service the preacher took the boy aside and asked, "look kid, what did you mean by answering 'God' when I asked the question? Didn't you know I was talking about a squirrel?" "Sure if knew you were talking about a squirrel. But you're a preacher aren't you? This is church and you're supposed to be talking about God, not squirrels!"

### **Intergenerational Worship**

Many churches have, over many years, from time to time brought all the generations together for worship. It may be the case that many of these were high quality affairs that engaged the senses of all ages. But my experience has been that more often than not these liturgies, although called intergenerational, were largely by children or youth for children or youth, and that the attempt to include children ended up excluding everyone else.

Now this is not to say that children's talks and intergenerational worship can never be effective. It is just that, in my opinion, they are often half-measures that fail to resolve the fundamental problem which is that we have we have raised a couple of generations of children who do not know how to worship and are not comfortable in the main worship space.

What I am advocating is an end to practices that keeps clergy and congregation from searching for more legitimate and creative ways to include children in worship. John Westerhoff has said that if children can't participate in our worship then we must change our worship. Fundamentally this means that children need to join the movement that has seen the liturgy truly become the work of all the people. This is consonant with the shift in liturgical practice from the congregation as passive recipients to the congregation as active participants. In this sense children are not just recipients of what the worship experience offers but are full participants. Anything an adult can do in worship a child could do as well.

It is time to bring the children back.

### **Why?**

**One.** On a completely pragmatic level it is one of our best bets to reverse the decline of the church. One of the major factors of the steep decline of the church in the West is the individual who attends church as a child and rejects it as an adolescent. We have lost whole generations to this phenomenon.

Of note is a recent report on church growth available from the Faith Communities Today research project. The report is one in a series produced by The Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP), based on a 2010 survey that analyzed responses from 11,077 randomly sampled congregations of all faith traditions. Drawing on extensive survey data, noted researcher C. Kirk Hadaway paints a compelling picture of factors leading both to church growth and decline. One of the findings is that congregations that involved children in worship were more likely to experience significant growth. Whether a congregation has relatively few or more than a few children and youth, not involving them in worship is associated with decline. It is the congregations that focus efforts on attracting younger families and involve children in worship that tend to see growth.

**Two:** It is simply the right thing to do if we are serious about the faith formation and spiritual nurture of children.

Church gives little consideration to how children learn. Identity is formed through participation in practices; and including developmentally appropriate opportunity to reflect on practice. For children to learn how to worship they will need to be in worship.

Ideally this formation takes in intergenerational congregational learning – indeed learning is already taking place within all faith communities, but is it the learning we want?

**Three:** The rest of the faith community will benefit from the sacramental presence of the child.

Last year I gave an address *The Sacrament That Won't Sit Still* in which I noted that sacraments 'work' when they are received. Notwithstanding that, for instance, the bread and wine are signs of God's grace detached from the motivation/state/nature of the recipient, it is also the case that for sacraments to actually 'effect' that which they represent they must, by definition, be received.

As such, for the Christian community to experience/know children as sacraments they must be prepared to receive them; receive them in the same way they receive baptism, Eucharist etc. That is that the Christian community must formalise the reception of the child in the same way they do the other sacraments.

Initially there must be teaching and consensus that the child is a means of grace. There must be practises that regularly expose the larger community to the child. There must be opportunity for the larger community to dialogue with the child.

In a true learning community individuals have the capacity to reform the community and not just be formed by it. Because of the presence of children the community will reform and renew itself.

**Things to consider as we make this shift.**

**Children's faith formation may become a 'compromise manoeuvre' between ideal and actualities; children's faith formation as *in the meantime*.**

And this is where Godly Play can come in. Godly Play is a method that engages the traditional and historical liturgical practices of the church. Tomorrow when those of you who are new to Godly Play will experience ea 'full session', you will experience the historical 'shape of the liturgy'. Children who are exposed to Godly Play will instinctively absorb and leaden the shape and practices of Eucharistic worship – gathering, proclamation, response, meal, and dismissal.

To the extent what I am proposing will happen, to that extent it will take time, probably a long time. In the meantime Godly Play is a 'safe' place for children to experience an appropriate learning experience in the community of children as a community of practice.

**Children can do serious work.**

Consistent with the notion that children should be entertained intergenerational worship tends to 'dumb down'.

Children can do serious work and can do serious work with adults. Again, Godly Play acknowledges and affirms this truism. Godly Play rejects the religious education as entertainment model and engages children as capable of serious work. Best exemplified in the wondering – Godly Play trusts the tradition, the story, to speak for itself without interpretation, and trusts the children to access and internalise the meaning of the story in

ways that nurtures their own spiritual development and provides them with religious language.

**Adults can and should 'play'.**

It is important to name that the 'respectability phase' of the church has not necessarily been in the best interest of the spiritual nurture of adults. But that's another presentation.

**Three. Children can do anything an adult can do.**

Accordingly Christian communities must design and implement ritual actions that take and place the child in the midst of the community. At the least this would include children engaged in the myriad roles that lay people assume in the church. Most importantly this would include children's participation in the liturgy; not merely, and only, as recipients of the work of the people but children as the people who do the work of the people.

Just imagine, children as readers, as intercessors, as communion ministers. Just imagine, children assuming roles that have never before been associated with lay ministries in the church because we have never before imagined children as lay ministers in the church. If Christian communities are to know and experience children as means of grace then those communities will need to learn how to take and place children into their very midst.

"The children will now leave" will not be found in any prayer book but it is an accepted and oft-used liturgical phrase. Furthermore it has become the practice of the church to marginalise children and ministry to children in myriad ways. It is time to invite them back.