

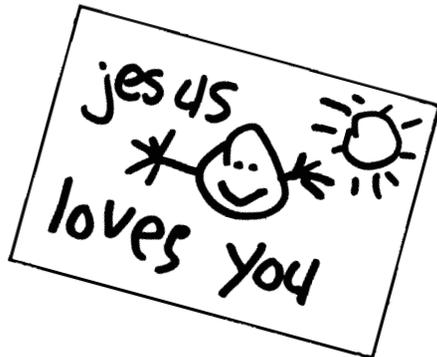
The Ministry of Children

D.C. Bensen, in the foreword to *Children as Partners in the Church* by Dennis Bensen and Phyllis Heusser, tells of a Sunday worship service in which a special ministry took place. While his parents listened to the sermon, a young boy busily coloured a picture of Jesus and wrote in crooked letters across the page "Jesus loves you." Despite his mother's embarrassment, the boy insisted on giving the picture to a man sitting farther along the pew.

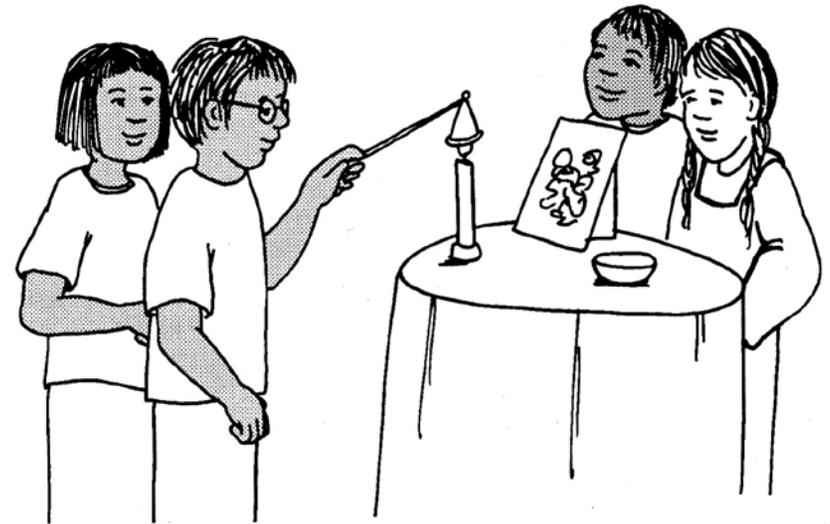
A few weeks later, the man stopped the boy's mother and remarked that he was so thankful for the young boy's gift of the picture. He shared that he had been struggling with his wife's death and that when he received the boy's picture he felt God come into his heart.

Through that simple act, God had used a child's innocence and directness to help comfort a grieving and lonely person. The youngest among us are capable of being partners in the total ministry of the Church, and need to be valued as such.

Children are not the Church of the future. They are the church of the present. Children can know and experience God and have faith to share. We need to know that all of us are on the faith journey together and that God is active in all our lives. Worship can be the place and the activity where we seek God's will and presence for our lives together in community.



Why Children in Worship?



Jesus said, "Let the children come..."

Mark 10:14

Jesus and the Children



In all three synoptic gospels we have an account of the disciples arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. In response, Jesus brings a child into their midst, not as the one to receive instruction from Jesus or the disciples, but as the one whose presence was to be the clue in answering the disciples' probing question. Jesus said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me" (*Mark 9:37*).

Not long after this, as Jesus was deep in conversation with the religious leaders and

his disciples, some children were brought to Jesus so he could touch them and bless them. The disciples, possibly concerned about Jesus' tiredness and fearing that the children's presence might interfere with the seriousness of the discussion that was taking place, turned the children away.

When Jesus noticed this he was angry, and said to the disciples, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it. And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them" (*Mark 10:14-16*).



Why Children in Worship?

According to John Westerhoff, a leading Christian educator, children's presence in worship is not only important, but is necessary if we are to become the whole people of God.

Westerhoff's premise is that faith is "caught" not "taught," and what better way for children to know what faith is all about than to be a part of a community that laughs together, cries together, struggles together, and worships together – a community that lives and shares its faith with all its members.

When a child is baptized in our midst and made a member of the Church of Christ, the adults of the congregation promise to be active in nurturing that child's faith. We need to work together to do just that – to nurture our children in their faith, and to be nurtured by them in return. Children give us the gift of trust and a fresh point of view; adults can share the gift of acceptance, experience, and the wisdom of the Church through the ages.

Worshipping Together

If we believe that faith is "caught" not "taught," and if Sunday morning is the time that is important to us as a worshipping community, then adults and children need to be together at this time. Worship is one of the basic ways people learn what it means to be Christian. Children learn worship by worshipping with the congregation. They learn they belong to Christ and are welcome in his Church. They participate in the drama of Baptism and Communion as signs of God's kindness and favour, of God's love and forgiveness. Children need to take part in worship regularly, and from time to time to take leadership roles. We all learn best by doing, and understand more clearly that which is concrete rather than abstract.

Worship that includes both adults and children might be a little different from what we are normally accustomed to. We will be looking at a service planned to meet a wide range of experience and ability. We will probably see more movement, hear more music, and experience more drama. Periods of silence may not be quite as silent, prayers may be shorter and sermons may contain more stories and illustrations. We will probably see more variety in our worship in order to stimulate thought and discussion and to reinforce learnings.

