

CHAPTER 18

Children at the Eucharist

Children are not the church of the future. Children are the future of the church! The sparseness of children and young people in many Anglican churches is a common cause for concern. On the one hand, some communities look to other traditions which appear to be having more success in drawing and keeping youth. On the other, the Anglican tradition has both a wealthy symbolic vocabulary and a most inclusive eucharistic policy which can arguably make it a fertile environment for all-age eucharistic worship.

Baptised children have as much right and duty to be present at the Eucharist as every other baptised person. They are not merely training to be the church of tomorrow.

Special Eucharists and exciting activities may attract young people for a time, and these may even bring their parents with them. As a rule, however, regular attendance by children at the weekly Eucharist is the result of the committed care-giver(s) coming to church with their child(ren).

In New Zealand, as in a growing number of other Anglican churches overseas, it is recognised that all the baptised have a right to receive communion whatever their age. "We who are many are one body, for we *all*- young and old- share the one bread."

Babies, not yet on solids, can receive the wine. Infants can receive the intincted bread. Care needs to be taken, now that baptism is seen to be admission to communion, that there doesn't develop an "admission to wine" for children who "are now old enough."

Lollies or biscuits ought never to be administered instead of communion. Nor is it appropriate to invent special words of administration for children. Children are quite capable of appreciating and growing into the words of administration authorised in *A New Zealand Prayer Book*.

Children have a natural sense of mystery and of wonder. This is lost with age, not gained. Children are naturally caught up in the atmosphere of a worship

service. If children are bored and restless it often indicates that the adults are probably not far off boredom and restlessness themselves.

One model is to have children and adults separate for the Ministry of Word and Prayer. Children leave at an appropriate point at the beginning of the service and might return again just before the Peace. Such a pattern needs to recognise that both groups are continuing worship at their own "level." It is not that the children are receiving instruction while the adults continue at worship. The children's celebration of the Word needs to include songs and prayers just as the adults' does. There is a growing amount of resources available to use for such multi-level celebrations focusing on the Three Year Series. In order to recognise the equality of children and adults, occasionally the children need to be able to stay in church and the adults leave for their liturgy of the Word in the hall!

Another model, in which the Eucharist is seen as the service for God's whole family, has children present alongside the adults from beginning to end. At such a service care needs to be taken that the service is not too long, that the children's presence is taken seriously, and that the adults find nourishment as well.

Sometimes people speak as if a Eucharist cannot be a "family service." Almost as if Jesus' greatest mistake was instituting the Eucharist! These seem not to have explored the flexibility and creative possibilities of contemporary eucharistic worship.

If children are distressed in a service they can be taken out. It needs to be clear, however, that as soon as they quieten they are brought back in again.

Children and young people can exercise all manner of functions and ministries within the liturgy - as much as adults. If week by week the community uses a clear range of simple cues and responses, regular worshippers, including children, will be able to share in these parts of the service from memory. Young children will not be able to participate while the congregation reads long, complex texts together.

Children or young people can exercise all the roles traditionally assigned to the deacon. These roles include introducing the confession, proclaiming the Gospel, providing leadership for the Prayers of the People, inviting the congregation to exchange the Peace, preparing the holy table and setting the

bread and wine upon it, sharing in distributing the bread and wine, and dismissing the congregation.

Children need to be included at the door among the welcomers. Books need to be handed to children (even those who do not yet read). Children can take up and bring forward the collection. They can bring forward the bread and wine at the Preparation of the Gifts.

As well as these there can be drama, action songs, stories, dramatic reading, dance, puppets, drawing and colouring in, and so on. Children can also be involved in the following:

Processions: The whole assembly can join in the entrance procession, or just those who wish to, or all the children. Some bring in the processional cross, banners, the candles, the Bible, incense, thurible...

Penitential material: Young people can act out a brief drama which might highlight some area where forgiveness might be needed. A young person could read "The summary of the law" or "A new commandment" or a sentence (from page 407).

In a community which consistently uses "**Lord, have mercy**" as the response to "Lord, have mercy" (and similarly "Christ, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**") children could lead the form from page 459 (without the congregation needing to turn to it). Three different children can be involved, each reading a sentence. Page 459 may form the model for constructing similar simple sentences such as the following:

God calls us to be holy
so in silence let us ask for forgiveness. (*This could be said by the presider, with another/others reading the following sentences*).

Silence

Either

God our Creator,
you have made all things good,
but we do not love you with all our heart,
and with all our soul,
and with all our mind,
and with all our strength.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Jesus our friend,
you forgive our sins,
but we do not forgive and befriend each other.
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit,
you love us and dwell in us,
but we often find it difficult
to love ourselves.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Or

Jesus, Word of God and Saviour of all:
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Jesus, Good Shepherd and Lamb of God:
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Jesus, true vine and bread of life:

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

The presider concludes this form with a brief absolution such as:

May the compassionate God have mercy on us,
forgive us, and bring us to fullness of life. **Amen.**

Readings: Some young people are excellent readers. The readings can also be dramatised in some form. If a token child, however, who is not a good reader, is used to read from the scriptures no one may benefit. In such a case it would be better (for the children also) if the scriptures are confidently read by an adult who is able to tell the story well.

For the proclamation of the Gospel two children can bring a lit candle each, and stand either side of the person proclaiming the Gospel.

Children's bags: At the beginning of the sermon children may be given special bags. Each bag can contain some crayons; a board (slightly larger than A4); a picture to colour (size A4) which relates to the season, sermon, or a reading; one or two extra blank sheets can be used by the children for doing their own drawings. (It is amazing what the children will come up with!) It is preferable that the children stay in their own place (alongside an "adult helper"). As children grow out of drawing and colouring in, they are growing into listening to the sermon.

The children's pictures can be looked at after the Prayers of the People, for example. Comments on the pictures can be a moment of education for the adults as well as the children!

For smaller children "busy bags" can be provided which contain quiet toys, board books, and other things which can be brought out as necessary during the service.

Some Questions

How are children and young people made welcome in your community?

In the light of this chapter review children's involvement in the Eucharist.