



DIOCESE OF CANTERBURY
CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S MINISTRY

Children at the Eucharist; Good Practice in All-age Worship

Children present

During the last twenty years children have increasingly become familiar with attending Eucharistic worship, the service of Holy Communion. A common practice in many parishes is for the children to have their own liturgy of the Word and then join the congregation at the Offertory. This may include a special welcome, offering or showing work and receiving a blessing. In a few churches they will attend the whole service once a month or on special occasions. Some church secondary and primary schools have termly Communion services, either in church, in the school hall, or as part of a class celebration, where the children are fully involved in every aspect of the service.

Adults Only

There are also many churches where children have little or no experience of Eucharistic worship. Either they spend the majority of the service in the church hall, or they only come to church for a special non-eucharistic 'Family Service'. This can lead to problems on occasions like Easter when the natural desire is for the children to share in the main service but it is inevitably Holy Communion. In a few churches, children as old as sixteen are still attending 'Sunday school' because it has been suggested that they would not enjoy the main service. But now we are beginning to face the challenge of children being present and worshipping at the Eucharist every week, some of them as communicants.

How can we celebrate the Eucharist with children?

The move to admit children to Holy Communion has forced the whole question of how the service is conducted on to the agenda. In some parishes, it has continued unchanged with little revision for twenty or more years. People object to children receiving Holy Communion for a variety of reasons. Some of them spring from a natural fear of change, of discomfort, of having local practices altered or questioned.

There is much that we can learn from other parts of the Christian Church and our fellow Anglicans, but every tradition and culture worships in its own way so copying something that works in one context does not guarantee of success. Common Worship and the advent of the new Eucharistic prayers have provided a wonderful opportunity to review all of our liturgies. This can include the question, ***How can we celebrate the Eucharist effectively with children present?***

Let them be children

Many children are not sure how to behave in church. It is not the same as school, although they may attend 'Sunday school'. When they run into church they want to greet their parents but they may not be allowed to sit with them. Some people will smile at them; others will frown. We need to recognise that children do not behave the same way as adults. They want to see and sometimes to move. Moving may occasionally mean a toddler taking a run up the aisle to be nearer the action, but this is part of being a child. With clear guidance, a genuine welcome and a good example from the adult congregation, he will soon learn what behaviour is expected of him.

Let them belong

Children enjoy singing so they need a few hymns that they recognise. These do not have to be special children's hymns but need to have strong tunes and simple words. They like to take collections, give out service sheets, and take up the bread and wine at the Offertory. Many older children read well and are good at writing Intercessions that are clear and to the point. In some churches they can sing in the choir or be servers. They like to feel that they belong, that they are accepted for what they are and can be involved and valued.

Accept their ministry

Most of all, we need to receive the ministry of children and learn from them, taking them seriously as ministers of Christ. Children have much to offer a church, and a church that takes its children seriously will always be given a sense of vitality and hope through them.

Depth

Children deserve the riches of the Gospel. These riches need to be given to them appropriately, but this should not become shallow and superficial. We often feel that the main thing in a service with children is to be entertaining, but many an entertaining sermon has no depth at all. Worship can be lively and informal but it also needs to nurture and to challenge us. Children have a vivid sense of the wonder and mystery of God. They are good at praying and even being quiet for short spaces of time because their minds are so much less cluttered than adults.

Review your worship by asking a few questions:

- Are we so busy making God accessible and exciting that we lose the beauty of his holiness?
- Do we use silence, a variety of music, and time for reflection during prayers?
- Do we allow time to listen to God and to enjoy being with him?
- Do we use a variety of Scripture in our readings and teaching?
- Do we allow every worshipper to have an encounter with the Living God?

Quality

God deserves the best we can give, and so do our children. If our services are boring and irrelevant for children, it might be that they are not good enough for adults either, or even for God! Poor worship feeds no one. Quality will require work in planning and work in rehearsals. Make a video of a Sunday service from the back row and have a good look at it. Identify things that can be improved. Look for ways in which the service can become more accessible to children. Discuss your ideas with some parents and children's leaders. Never overlook the importance of listening to children themselves; they will have many ideas to offer. Always aim to give our children the best.

Worship for all ages

It is not only possible; it is also necessary to celebrate the Eucharist with children and young people present on some occasions. Our Anglican tradition has been to assume that only adults are ever going to be present and to arrange the service accordingly. This assumption still holds strong in some places. However a church that does the hard work necessary and commits itself to providing worship where all ages are truly involved will find many rewards. Not least in celebrating the vibrant faith and lively ministry of its youngest members.

Further assistance

Practical advice and assistance on all aspects of this subject from the Children & Young People's Ministry Adviser. A wide range of resources on worship and general children and youth work is available on loan from the Diocesan Resource Centre at Diocesan House,

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