



Partnering with

Linda Shantz

Children

If we take seriously Christ's words about becoming like children to enter God's kingdom, we will learn to partner with children in the ways we are the church. Many congregations are moving in this direction with efforts such as inclusive worship. For the most part, however, we still regard children and youth as half-baked humans, empty vessels who need to be filled with our superior knowledge of how to be a people of faith.

Both as individuals and as congregations, we need to understand the full humanity of children and youth. In their book, *Regarding Children*, Herbert Anderson and Susan Johnson help us transform our attitude from one of indifference or disdain to one of respect. Children possess the fullness of being human at birth, and yet what is fully present in them is still to be realized. As adults, we are always becoming what we already are, just as children continue to realize what they are becoming. Our "childness" endures in the qualities that continue into adult life: vulnerability, openness, immediacy, and neediness. We never outgrow these qualities, and our responses to children and youth "are shaped by our attitude toward the childhood that endures into adulthood as 'childness' within."¹

Examining Our Own Inner Life

If we are eager to forget our own childhoods, we may overlook the children in our midst. We must work at examining our individual and congregational attitudes about childhood, with the aim of achieving equal regard, remembering Christ's teachings that turn upside down all earthly expectations. Our Lord's sayings about children and discipleship invite us to respond to the children in our midst as fully human, worthy of respect, and as models who teach dependency and the freedom to live with vulnerability.²

Our attitude toward the very young, in particular, must be characterized by sacrifice more than self-interest as we learn to go at their pace. Kathryn Chapman suggests that "part of our task as persons who nurture children is to be in step with God's timing, a creative pacing divinely led...God's open invitation to join in shaping a child's life offers every significant adult a responsibility and a challenge." Giving children what they need, expect, and deserve calls forth our very best, as we seek to nourish them from overflow, not from emptiness.³ Therefore, we need to care for our own spiritual, physical, and other needs in order to bring our very best to meet the needs of our children.

Supporting Parents

One way the church can facilitate a transformation in our attitudes about children is to offer support for parents in their vocation of childrearing. When preparing for the sacrament of infant baptism, we can explore with the parents how this new being has changed and will change their family's life. We can provide seminars on parenting skills, taking care not to undermine the self-confidence or add to the guilt that many parents already feel about their childrearing capabilities. We need to provide an accepting atmosphere where parents feel free to explore their values and beliefs as well as their problems and fears.

The Role of Worship

Worship is a natural venue for partnering with children and youth in praising God. Anderson and Johnson speak of how children can “evoke a spirit of wonder and benediction and sometimes provide surprising and unsolicited consolation.”⁴ Involving them in worship through leading call/response portions of liturgy and scripture readings are good places to begin. However, we also need to consider their participation in shaping worship:

- invite older children and youth to give the children’s moment or sermon;
- ask for their designs depicting sermon or special celebration themes as bulletin covers;
- open your worship committee to children or youth who wish to write liturgy or help with planning other aspects of worship.

When we do these things, we are teaching our children how they are integral to our life as a community of worship. They will teach us how to recover a sense of awe, how to be more open to the presence of God, and how to trust God. Ultimately, we will all be working towards God’s plan for a more inclusive faith community in which we care for and need each other.

Praying with Children

Another way of being the church together is through our prayer lives. Joan Bel Geddes in her book, *Children Praying*, suggests that traditional prayers used in worship may express a degree of faith that many children find puzzling or unbelievable, and/or that use complex language.⁵ If we want children to do their own praying, we need to model a heart-felt attitude of praying, using heart-felt words. The Lord’s Prayer can be meaningful if we pray humbly, honestly, hopefully, and if we act as though we mean what we are saying. As children mature, they may discover written prayers that speak to them, and these can supplement their own spontaneous prayers.

Polly Berrien Berends writes about a way of praying silently with children in her book, *Gently Lead*. She and her sons regularly turned to God in silence simply with the idea of seeing what could be learned. She taught them that God is a

reliable force that is always present, that God is spirit with a nature of invisible good, and that they can see God with an “inner seeing” and thereby bring God’s light into their lives.⁶ Regularly seeking God’s presence in silence forms a connection to the Source of love and wisdom.

In *Talking With Your Children About Prayer*, Myra B. Nagel describes a five-step process to use with children: relax, center, focus on a theme depending on maturity, listen silently, and share. This form of prayer could be used in church school, midweek programs, and in worship. “Children often demonstrate a natural aptitude for listening to God’s voice within themselves, having freer imaginations and less constrictive inhibitions than adults have.”⁷ Again, we can learn from each other as we come to God in prayer.

JoAnne Taylor, in her book *Innocent Wisdom*, notes how children invite us again and again to share with them, and that it is an exercise in humility to acknowledge that “children can open our eyes again and again to truth, love, faith, and life.”⁸

The next time you are in communal worship, try to imagine yourself as a child. Does anything make you wonder, bother you, or make you feel good? Do you feel included, excluded, or patronized? Let the child within and all children be rich resources for you. When we recognize and value the “childness” within, the traits that bring us to God as a child, we begin to respond to Christ’s teaching, “Unless you become . . .” □

1 Anderson, Herbert, and Johnson, Susan B. W., *Regarding Children*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, 10.

2 Ibid., 21.

3 Chapman, Kathryn N., “What Children Need from Significant Adults,” *When Children Suffer*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987, 43.

4 Anderson and Johnson, 71.

5 Geddes, Joan Bel, *Children Praying*, Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 1999, 17.

6 Berends, Polly Berrien, *Gently Lead*, New York: HarperCollins, 1991, 18.

7 Nagel, Myra B., *Talking With Your Children About Prayer*, New York: United Church Press, 1990, 24.

8 Taylor, JoAnne, *Innocent Wisdom*, New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989, 131.



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