

Valuing Children

a theological reflection

by Robert Weston & Jo Williams



The
United
Reformed
Church

Introduction

This series of articles has arisen from a desire to offer the United Reformed Church some materials to allow greater engagement in theological reflection in all aspects of our ministry with children: as part of our worshipping communities, as part of our families, as part of our communities.

For the purposes of these reflections we are using the definition of a child as a person under the age of 18. In doing so, we recognize the huge variety of experiences that children/young people have in these formative years.

This first reflection is rooted in the understanding of children as valuable and valued members of our communities, in which we consider the appropriate responses of local congregations to children in their midst.



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Valuing Children

Our starting point is that all of humanity is loved and valued by God. The creator of the entire earth and all humanity looked at the world and declared 'it is good' and 'God was very pleased' (Genesis 1:31). In our culture and society it may seem that this applies to all of humanity: women and men, black and white, children and adults but this has not always been a widely accepted perspective. Some would argue that we are still a long way from this ideal of valuing all people. However we believe that every person is created in God's own image and so from the Genesis account, we conclude with Douglas McConnell that '...every human being enters the world as a child bearing the dignity uniquely set in the creation of humankind.'¹

Jesus spent much of his time challenging the community in which he lived and moved. He talked about people of other faiths being an example to the Jews, e.g. the Good Samaritan. He showed great respect for women who clearly had important roles in his group of followers. He dignified those who society rejected. He even placed a child in the centre, to illustrate the nature of the kingdom of God.

The Christian community has often needed to be reminded that all of humanity needs to be valued. Indeed, Paul in his letter to the church in Galatia writes, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.'²

**“ I wish my church listened more to young people. We have good ideas but no one listens to us because they think all we care about is football
(Boy, 12) ”**

¹ Understanding God's Heart for Children, p 13

² Galatians 3:28

The church today needs to be reminded that children are not of lesser or greater importance but are equal in the eyes of God. One of the most powerful ways we can demonstrate that we are 'one in Christ' is to ensure that the voices of children are heard. Margaret Withers emphasizes in the conclusion of her book: 'It is vital that children's voices are heard and their needs are wholeheartedly supported.'³

We also need to recognize that although we are equally valued by God, children are not identical to adults and we have much to learn from one another. Children are distinct from adults in their maturity and ability and depend on adults for their nurture and protection. So we recognise in their vulnerability our special responsibility for their care. The Bible consistently refers to children as a blessing and a gift from God. 'When we regard children as vulnerable and worthy of care, we demonstrate our understanding that they are gifts to be protected and blessings to be welcomed and cared for.'⁴

**“ Church is only good if people are welcoming.
Even if you are different you are welcome ”
(Boy, 13)**

In doing so we must beware of treating the gifts as possessions either too precious to unwrap from the cotton wool or as possessions to throw around and break as we adults choose. In our consumerist society, we need to emphasise that children are not commodities, not possessions, not for sale or abuse. As a caring community we must demonstrate consistency in our words and our actions. In other words, our orthodoxy (right speaking) should match our orthopraxis (right action).



³ *Mission-shaped children*, p 107

⁴ *Understanding God's Heart for Children*, p 103



In accepting the inherent value of all people, we need to listen carefully to the voices of children, to hear what God is saying in and through their lives. Careful listening will lead to mutual relationships which are a blessing to both children and adults. 'Recognizing the intrinsic worth of children causes adults to welcome children.'⁵ Who in turn

benefit the whole people of God by their presence.

There are many congregations where children are not present, some congregations recognise the need to adapt or change their practice in order to integrate children into their lives and some refuse to change, thereby refusing to be blessed and encouraged by the presence of children. Berryman observes that '... when a congregation refuses to welcome children fully into its life, it misses something critical for understanding God. There is something "messy, playful, noisy, active, spontaneous, restless and unpredictable" about the Divine that children can teach adults. When this aspect of God is missed by worshippers and theologians, they put the church in peril.'⁶ The inclusion of children cannot be seen as an optional extra, something of low priority – the inclusion of children has to be a high priority and words need to be matched with appropriate actions.

“ (at my church) I feel safe. There are adults I can trust. (Boy, 13) ”

⁵ *Understanding God's Heart for Children*, p 107

⁶ *Berryman quoting Mercer 2005* p 177

If we believe that children should be an integral part of our church lives then certain action has to be taken, certain procedures need to be put in place – not because of legalistic requirements but because a community of grace has to welcome, nurture and protect in order to ensure God's grace is experienced by all. There are many things that need to be in place, for example: welcomers at the church doors need to know how to welcome young and old, premises need to be safe, appropriate toys and resources may need to be bought, and child protection procedures must be in place.



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Sadly we live in a world where children are not always valued cared for and protected. It is essential therefore that the church, called to live by Kingdom values (the values modelled by Christ), creates an environment where all are safe and included.

'So much of welcoming and nurturing children involves appropriate adult behaviour. We create child protection policies, screening processes and codes of conduct to ensure that adults behave appropriately with children. We train our children about how adults should act with them and how they should act with other children. Much of the Bible revolves around appropriate behaviour because we live in a sin centred world. In our fallen state, we forget how to act in Kingdom ways.'⁷ So our special concern for children and their care is in response to the teaching and example of Jesus who commands us to 'Love one another the way I have loved you'.⁸

⁷ *Understanding God's Heart for Children*, p 122

⁸ *Through the Eyes of a Child*, p 171

Summary

'As a community of faith we should always value one another'⁹ this is part of the way we show that we love God. Therefore, we should always seek to include young and old in all that we do, aware of any special provision that we should make to enable this inclusion. In return, we shall be blessed and we shall learn more of God's grace.

“ A Good Church is a place that offers you care, love and happiness. ”
(Girl, 10)

In reflecting on grace, Angela Shier-Jones says, 'Communities fail where they do not respond graciously to the needs of children placed in their care. One of the things which we do not often think about is that a failure to provide grace as well as sustenance can cause serious harm to a child.'¹⁰

Jesus teaching in Matthew 18 is as challenging for us today as it was for the first disciples. Not only are we to look to children to see what is required to enter the Kingdom, we must also consider that we ourselves will be judged on the way we welcome the child in our midst.



⁹ Matthew 22:39

¹⁰ *Through the Eyes of a Child*, p 171

¹¹ *The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament* by Judith M Gundry-Volf in *The Child in Christian Thought*, p 44

In reflecting on this passage Judith M Gundry-Volf writes: “Jesus thus redefines the service of children as a sign of greatness for all disciples. What appeared to be an undistinguished activity - care for children, belonging to the domain of women, similarly marginalized people – becomes a prime way for all disciples to demonstrate the greatness that corresponds to the reign of God.”¹¹ Therefore the nurture and welcome of children is a calling not just for parents or junior church leaders but for all those who would be disciples of Christ.

**“A good church is a lot of things. It means that people work together and care for each other and they love God.
(Girl, 10)”**

In closing, may the words of our mouths and the actions of all our church communities be acceptable to God – and may we know the blessing that comes from the children of God.



Discussion Questions

For individuals:

1. In what ways do you show that you value children/young people in your life?
2. Can you recall times when children have given you a greater insight or understanding of God?

For children/youth workers:

1. How do you enable children's voices to be heard in your worshipping community?
2. How are you ensuring that expressed beliefs are matched by appropriate actions?

For churches:

1. What might you do to ensure your worshipping community is known as a child-friendly church?
2. How might you develop greater involvement of children in the life of your church?

Further Reading

Mission-shaped Children: Moving Towards a Child-centred Church, Margaret Withers, Church House Publishing, 2006

The Child in Christian Thought, Marcia J Bunge (ed.), Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 2001

Through the Eyes of a Child: New Insights in Theology from a Child's Perspective, Anne Richards & Peter Privett (eds.), Church House Publishing, 2009

Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework, edited by Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Oruna & Paul Stockley, Authentic Publishing, 2007

Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace, Jerome W. Berryman (Author), Morehouse Publishing, 2010



The quotations from children included here come from the “My Church – Children’s Voices” survey carried out by the Youth and Children’s Work Committee in 2009. For more information on how you can get involved and listen to the voice of children and young people in your church, please contact the Children’s and Youth Office, URC Church House, 86 Tavistock Place, LONDON WC1H 9RT

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