

Children and Holy Communion

a theological reflection

by 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 second reflection considers the role of children in worship and in particular the place of children in the service of Holy Communion.

We recognise the diversity of the United Reformed Church and the variety of terms which are used to describe Holy Communion, such as the Lord's Supper, Eucharist or Mass. For continuity we will use the term Holy Communion unless quoting other writers.

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“ I like to worship God it makes me feel alive. (Girl 11) ”

The starting point

Collective worship is an essential element of the community of faith. In the early Church we know that Christians met together regularly for prayer, and teaching and to share bread and wine (see for example Acts 2:46) and although there is no explicit mention of children in these early accounts, nor is there any specific reference to their exclusion. In Jewish tradition, children are seen as part of the whole community of faith and special instruction is given for their inclusion when the whole people gather to remember Passover, or to hear the recital of the law of Moses.

“Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners living in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. “ (Deuteronomy 31:12)

In the gospels, we see Jesus welcoming children and affirming their contribution to worship and community life. As children were present at the worship of the Jewish community and in the ministry and teaching of Jesus, we can assume as Stephen Lake does, that their place in the early Christian community is implicit.¹

If our worship is essential to our understanding of ourselves and our belief, children need to experience meaningful worship as part of the expression of the community of Christ. It is through our worship that we tell the story of our faith and reaffirm our belief, therefore worship becomes not just the expression of our faith but also essential in the formation and growth of faith. “Ritual, rite and liturgy are capable of both the nurturing and evangelising means of assisting people on the journey of faith.”²

“ It is good to worship and makes it interesting for children. (Girl 8) ”

The sharing of bread and wine is at the heart of our faith story. In it we declare our faith in God, proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection and explore the nature of redemption. The gospel is offered to all, irrespective of age and we know that children can and do respond to it.

¹ *Let the children come to Communion* p30

² *Unfinished Business Children and the Churches* p47

The position as it is now

There are many different practices within the United Reformed Church concerning children in worship. Children may attend all or part of the service alongside adults, or there may be services aimed particularly at children or families or all ages together. Some churches practice an open policy in which all are welcome to receive bread and wine. Others use a preparation course to teach children about communion before they receive the elements, and in others, Communion is offered to those who

“ Make church better! Include children more! (Girl 8) ”

have taken Membership. So there is no one prescribed pattern, each church is encouraged to find a pattern of worship which works for them. However, in 1990 the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church passed a resolution endorsing the Charter for Children in the Church, which says that

The full diet of Christian worship is for children as well as adults

This calls us to reflect on the real place of children in our worship. In worship as in life, children need a balanced diet to enable them to grow



“ Sometimes its boring and just for grown ups and not for kids. (Boy 6) ”

and develop. As churches we must take responsibility to provide a diet of worship which will help children thrive and grow in faith.

Children are active and keen to learn and participate, indeed children often learn best through participation and experience. We learn by watching and copying what those around us do. We learn by joining in, and the same is true of faith. “Our understanding of how faith develops has led us to see that children do not have to reach a certain age or educational level before they can have meaningful faith”³ Participating in the life of the faith community gives children (and adults) the opportunity to experience real faith for themselves long before they are able to articulate what that means for them personally. Westerhoff identified affiliative faith as a crucial stage of faith development, typical of school age children, in which faith stories are shared and begin to be owned as our own.



The church’s greatest faith story is shared in our remembering and re-enacting of the Last Supper. Jesus said “do this in remembrance of me”, therefore sharing bread and wine was always intended to be participatory learning, a story not just to be repeated and listened to, but to be lived out in the community of the faithful. As Stewart and Berryman pointed out “While experience of God in worship leads to knowledge of God, the primary method of knowing is participation”⁴ If we deny children the opportunity to participate fully in Holy Communion we deny them a key tool for understanding and expressing what it means to be part of that community and to own the Christ story and their part in it.

³ *Children and Holy Communion* p2

⁴ *Young Children and Worship* p13

A Good Church is...

“People coming to worship together and everyone taking part. (Girl 15)”

“A group/community of people worshipping God. (Boy 9)”

In her book *Welcoming Children*, Joyce Mercer comments on the connectedness and disconnectedness between the church's worship practices and the everyday lives of people in the world, particularly children.⁵ If faith is to have meaning, it must make connections and be grounded in experience. This belief has led many to conclude that “that children of all ages should be present alongside adults for part if not all of the service of Holy Communion”⁶

The Charter for Children also declares that

**Children are equal partners with adults
in the life of the church.**

And that

**Service is for children to give as
well as adults.**

“Churches that encourage children to be present throughout the worship service ... believe that children must intentionally be included as responsible participants and contributors in worship.”⁷ As they participate, children not only learn about worship but also come to see themselves as valued and responsible participants. This process is learned, and children emulate the behaviour of adults around them, so it is also important that adults are seen to be actively and meaningfully contributing to the worship of the whole as well. Children also learn from what we do not do and say, as much as what we do. Joyce Mercer, speaking of an experience when children were actively excluded from receiving bread and wine questions; “How did this experience shape the persons participating in it? What did the children learn that day about the Lord's Supper? What did they learn about their participation and inclusion in the whole body of Christ?”⁸

⁵ *Welcoming Children* p211

⁶ *Come and join the celebration* p8

⁷ *Children Matter* p228

⁸ *Welcoming Children* p211

In Conclusion

“ I love Jesus and I want to do what he said with the bread and wine to remember him. (Girl 9) ”

As we seek to be more open to God and each other, we must consider the place of children in our worship and ensure that through our words and actions we are communicating the truth of the gospel. When Jesus said “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16), it challenged the disciples to think differently about the place of children. There are no conditions of Jesus’ words. He does not say, the Kingdom will belong to such as these; when they are older and understand more and “if the kingdom belongs to them it is hard to conceive that the kingdom’s feast at the Lord’s Table, does not”.⁹

“ Let children have communion. (Boy 13) ”

For some this will be a challenge. It may challenge us to find new ways of worshipping together in church. It may change our thinking and our culture, just as it did when Jesus called the children to him. We too are called: “to take new risks and to change in attitude and activity towards and with children in a faithful response to God”.¹⁰

Jesus’ welcome of children was unambiguous. We should take care that our practice lives up to his example and does not exclude them. “If we are the Lord’s family, around the Lord’s table on the Lord’s day, then children must be present.”¹¹

⁹ Table Talk, p122

¹⁰ Unfinished Business Children and the Churches

¹¹ Come and join the celebration p5

Discussion Questions

For individuals:

1. Reflect on your experience of participating in Holy Communion. How important is Communion in your understanding and expression of Christian faith?
2. In what places and from what activities are children excluded in our society and why? How does this relate to your understanding of children and Communion?



Discussion Questions

For children/youth workers:

1. Children learn from the lessons that we don't intentionally teach as well as the ones we plan. What does your church's practice of worship and Holy Communion communicate to children either intentionally or not?

2. How do your children's and youth programmes and curriculum prepare children to participate in "the whole diet of Christian worship"?



For churches:

1. What constitutes a balanced diet of worship and how is this offered in your church?

2. What would it mean for your church to "do only those things in separate age groups which we cannot in all conscience do together?"¹²



¹² URC Charter for Children in the Church. See www.urch.org.uk

Further Reading

Hilton, D. *Table Talk, looking at the Communion Table from the outside and the inside*, The United Reformed Church, London 1998

CGMC *Unfinished Business Children and the Churches*, CCBI Publications

Lake, S. *Let the children come to Communion*, SPCK London 2006

Muir and Pedley *Come and join the celebration*, National Society/Church House Publishing 2001

Mercer, J. *Welcoming Children*, Chalice Press 2005

CGMC *Children and Holy Communion*, British Council of Churches 1989

Stewart and Berryman *Young Children and Worship*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville/London 1989

Husselbee and Thompson *Children in Communion*, The United Reformed Church, London 1990 (revised 2010) out of print but available from www.urc.org.uk



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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