

Counting the children

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Several years ago I remember very off-handedly asking one of the ushers in my congregation how, if they take the attendance count when they are collecting the offering, do they count the children who have left before the sermon?

The answer was simple. "We don't count the children."

I gently suggested that the ushers might try to find a way to change the point in the service at which they take the count, so that the children could be included in the numbers.

This time the answer was a little different, in a big way: "The children don't count."

I asked for him to explain to me why the children shouldn't count in the statistics that we keep about how many people were in worship on any given Sunday.

"They are not members."

I explained to him that they actually are what in our tradition we call "baptized" members of the congregation, even if they are not "adult" members. Then I asked him if when counting adults they are careful not to count any visiting or guest adults who could also be given the label of *not a member*. Of course he counts them. But it did make him pause.

We actually talked quite a while about it, with him repeating to me that same phrase, "the children don't count," far too often for my comfort. After a few more conversations together, we did start including children in that worship count.

Too often children don't count, or rather we don't take children *into account*, when we do many things in our churches: when we plan our worship services, when we schedule events too late in the evening for young children, when we don't provide child care for parents, when we organize community meals that will not be appetizing to children, even when we plan new buildings or renovations that ignore the needs of children.

In my experience, every time we took the time to think about how full inclusion of children and youth would impact a particular event, worship service, change in the structure of our community life/building, or even our overall vision as a community, all generations benefited.

The thing is, while the ushers were not counting the children in the sanctuary all those years, we were counting the children in every other place—counting them when they came to their fellowship and snack time, counting them in choir, counting them in Sunday school and counting them at youth group.

Yes, there was the counting that takes place to help us know how to plan ahead, and to make sure that all children were safe and accounted for. But mostly the counting was about measuring the success of our ministry.

Sundays when we were bursting at the seams were labeled a success. Sundays with low attendance or participation made me question almost anything and everything that we were doing as a church.

Even though children were not included in the “official” worship numbers that the church kept, I know that most of the adults in worship were indeed counting the children each week, because it was how we *all* measured the growth and the vitality of our congregation. People would mention to me how proud and optimistic they were when the numbers were high and how anxious they were when the stairs to the chancel during the children’s sermon were empty.

I hate to admit that I was also so easily discouraged by small numbers. Obviously, with some perspective I can see that numbers, trends, and an obsession with definitive measures of success were not the healthiest way to think about ministry with any number of children and youth.

What I really hate to admit is that in the midst of all of this counting, I sometimes short-changed the children who were there, the ones who made up that small number who actually showed up. My mind was on the ones who had made a different choice that day, instead of on the ones who gave me the privilege of being a part of their life and their education that day.

Looking back now, I absolutely cherish the Sunday mornings or youth group evenings when I just had two or three students and we had one another’s undivided attention. That is when the kind of effective ministry was done that I could feel in my

heart rather than count on my fingers. Now I actually wish there had been more of those opportunities.

The only number that truly counts is *one*—one child who needs a community to provide hospitality and safety, one child who needs adults who listen and mentor, one child who needs help finding their place in the hymnal so their voice can be heard amongst the congregation, one child who needs to be asked to contribute out of their gifts and energy, one child who needs help pouring a drink at a community meal, one child who needs to know that they are expected—that someone is counting on them and looking for them each week.

This is why the children count, and how we should be counting our children.

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