

Let the children serve

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On a shelf in our church library you can find a "Reading Guide" made by a fourth grader. It lists the types of books appropriate for different age groups and advises: "Remember--Kids (8-12) when you start the Bible, go at your own pace. It's a long book!"

In our congregation, there's a sixth grader who hustles to the back of the sanctuary every Sunday to collect the offering baskets and bring them forward. There's a first grader who sometimes plays her violin during worship, with a pencil attached to her bow to keep it straight. There's a second grader who takes her turn setting up a display on the front table to go along with the scripture reading.

And at Shiloh, there's little Samuel in his linen ephod, "ministering before the Lord."

In Jerusalem, there's 12-year-old Jesus sitting among the teachers at the temple.

It takes people of all ages to form a vibrant worshiping community. In the exuberant Psalm 148, we are told to praise the Lord: "Young men and women alike; old and young together!"

The children among us offer up their gifts of visual artistry and creative writing and music and service. Their parents often put in at least as much time and energy as their children so that these gifts can be shared with the church. And it is the role of the church to accept these gifts with grace and enthusiasm.

The writer of Colossians urges members of that church to clothe themselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” And sometimes this is what it takes to fully include children in our worship. Compassion and kindness when they forget to do what they agreed to do, or when they don't do it “right.” Humility and meekness to let go of some control over the worship service, to recognize that the Holy Spirit might have something in store that we cannot arrange ahead of time. And, yes, patience. Because the children are learning what it means to be part of a church. (Aren't we all?)

It is often much easier, as the church, to serve the children in our midst than it is to let the children serve us as part of *their* church. But imagine if Eli said to Samuel, “You're just a kid. You need to sit there and be quiet and watch how it's done. Then maybe we'll let you help out a bit when you're older.”

Imagine Mary and Joseph finding Jesus not inside the temple with the teachers, but outside, sad and discouraged because the religious folk were too busy to talk with a child.

We often think of our Christmas celebrations--both sacred and secular--as events that are *for* children. These texts remind us that we are called not just to teach and minister to children, but also to allow children to teach and minister to us.

Samuel ministers at the house of God in Shiloh. The boy Jesus teaches at the temple in Jerusalem. What children are teaching and ministering within your congregation? How can you more fully receive the gifts they offer?