

Let the children lead: A changed view of ministry

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A three-year-old girl came running down the center aisle of the sanctuary and straight into my arms. “I’m here!” she exclaimed, laying her head on my shoulder.

I had no idea who she was, but I held her close for a few moments before beginning the children’s message. I have forgotten what my message was about that day, and I imagine everyone else has too. But many of us will never forget this child’s exuberant and tender response to the invitation to join the circle of faith.

When I began serving as an associate pastor for children’s ministries, I thought I would be at it for a year or two—three at the most. It was a part-time position, after all; the hours matched the needs of my family. Our children were both in preschool at the time, so I planned to stay at the church until the youngest one entered kindergarten. Then, I thought, I would move on to something more high-profile and adult-centered—something more like what I’d envisioned when I was in divinity school.

Now my youngest child is an eighth grader, and my firstborn just got his driver’s permit. I am still working with younger children because every week I am blessed by their enthusiasm, bravery, questions, intelligence and love. I can scarcely imagine leading any kind of ministry that does not include such gifts.

The longer I’ve worked with children, the more I’ve become convinced that being present to children is a central responsibility of followers of Christ. When Jesus tells

his disciples, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them," he doesn't mean that they should hang around only until he's had the chance to pat them on the head, or until the disciples have enjoyed their kids-say-the-darnedest-things moment. He means that children belong to him and belong with him, as much as any of us, and that our letting them come to him is an integral part of our own discipleship. As Craig Dykstra writes in *Growing in the Life of Faith*, "The faith of children is essential in the faith of the whole church."

I did not grasp the significance of Christ's instruction at first. My attitude about working with children temporarily for convenience's sake and my aspiration to move on to another position as soon as possible put me in league with the hindering kind of disciples. I did not see children for their true worth within the community of God's people; I loved them dearly, but I confess that, as a minister, I saw them as steppingstones to something else.

Thankfully, I have come to understand that, like the disciples, I had everything backward. God did not call me to minister among children because they could advance my career; God called me to this ministry because they could help me let all that go.

As much as I might like to imagine I am equipped to lead children into the arms of Jesus, it is the children who have invited me to join them there. I am the beneficiary of one of the many blessings children offer adults: a ready and constant example of life lived as the true self, imperfections included. While layers of mixed motives and misguided aims covered the path God set before me, time and again children have helped me clear the way and simply be available in the present moment—to be "Here!" along with them. I needed and continue to need this relaxed attentiveness and unpretentious mutual interaction for the health and integrity of my own faith.

I also need to tend to the practice of presence for the children's sake. While I have not traveled the world as I once imagined I would, I have met the world through the boys and girls who come to our church. From children who were born in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border to children who have a parent in jail or in heaven to children whose lesbian moms are under attack from restrictive marriage laws, the children I am privileged to interact with have introduced me to the breadth of experience represented in the human family. Jesus calls me to treat these young ones with as much love and tenderness as I am able.

Like the rest of us, children long to be loved, to know that they are not alone. And though they may not articulate it in these terms, they also long to discover and use their gifts. Jesus summons us to help children find their way out from under a bushel and discover what it is that makes their light shine. I used to think that you had to be at least in college in order to experience and claim the light of God's call, but now I'm certain that the light shines within whomever it wants. I've seen children shine too many times to be convinced otherwise.

One way I've seen children encounter God's call is in the context of a bimonthly worship service that we hold for all the Sunday school classes, ages three through 11. Children's Church includes all the components of a regular service, but it is the children—as young as kindergartners—who take turns leading. By assuming responsibility for worship, the children begin to see themselves as important participants in God's unfolding story.

Recently, as the second grade teachers reviewed the list of liturgical opportunities (from ringing the bell—always a favorite—to serving communion), a child's hand shot up. Before the teacher could call on the boy he blurted out, "I want to do everything!"

This high-spirited willingness to participate often spills over into other worship settings. When we notice that a child has read the Bible passage of the day in a way that everyone could hear and understand, for example, we invite him or her to read in front of the whole congregation. After a third-grader read the Palm Sunday text last year, he told his mother, "I feel like I was meant to do this." The community fully agreed.

I have repeatedly seen and heard other children discover their calling to sing, to lead prayers or play some other part in the worship of God. Before our afternoon Christmas Eve service one year, the mother of a second-grader with some developmental difficulties wrote me to say that her son had asked if he could ring the bell at the beginning. How could a pastor say no? God calls children to be active participants, not merely silent observers, in worship and in other aspects of church life, because they possess unique gifts to offer and enlarge the body of Christ.

Among the more visible of these gifts is joyful compassion. Visiting prisoners has long been a part of our congregation's outreach. Though children cannot go to the monthly meetings at the jail, they delight in supporting the ministry by baking treats

for the members to share with prisoners. When one four-year-old from our church was asked by her teacher on Monday morning what she had done over the weekend, she replied: “We made cookies for our friends in jail!”

Children care about people in prison, about people who are homeless, about children who are hungry. I’ve seen them empty their piggy banks for people suffering from lack of potable water, give their gently used books away in stacks to the library on the pediatric unit at the local hospital and assemble hygiene kits for survivors of natural disasters. They’ve given me envelopes full of money they raised selling lemonade to help the victims of the earthquake in Haiti.

Maybe Jesus wants the children to come to him because he knows they understand how to express and share his love in ways it takes grown disciples many years to grasp. Maybe he wants to bless them because he knows that few other people do—and he makes it his business to bless the unblessed. But maybe he wants children to come near to him most of all because with them close by, the reign of God comes a little closer too. This is what it feels like to me, anyway.