

Precious Jewels

by Shirley W. Wilson

Church congregations benefit greatly from the unique gifts of children. They have much to offer us if we make a place for them. Congregations lose out when they neglect or ignore the contributions of these young members.

How many times have we heard church leaders describing children and young people as our “church of tomorrow?” What would happen if congregations acknowledged children as a vital part of the “church of today?” Dr. Kathy Koch, Founder and President of Celebrate Kids, Inc., uses a watchword that says, “Kids have present value, not just future potential!” Children in our churches need to be noticed, appreciated, and utilized as a lively part of the Body of Christ, gifted and necessary for the benefit of the whole faith community.

How many of us can remember pastors or other leaders who see children, especially in the Sunday morning worship service, as a noisy bother? Or, leaders who, at least, overlook children as part of a healthy congregation’s rituals. How many churches have introduced Children’s Church activities for the hidden purpose of getting these little “fidgets” away from worshipping adults?

Matthew, in his gospel, tells the story of the disciples who tried to remove children from their presence while Jesus taught. His quick response indicates how He felt. “Jesus said ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’” (Matt. 19:14 NIV). What would the Five Thousand gathered to hear Jesus preach (John 6) have eaten had a boy not given his lunch to Jesus? What did Jesus say about the children on Palm Sunday? After the Triumphal Entry, Jesus entered the temple area. The religious leaders of the temple expressed indignation at hearing the children shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Jesus again responded with a rebuke. “Have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise?’” (Matt. 21:15-16 NIV).

We correctly make room in our corporate worship for the needs and presence of the elderly, the handicapped, the hearing or visually impaired, and for visitors. Likewise, we must make room in our corporate worship for the needs and presence of our children. We ought to find ways for them to actively contribute to the Body of Christ where we give them “a place” in our worship.

Of course, babies and very young children who find it hard to sit for long periods should have appropriate programs to care for their needs. However, categorizing all ages of children in a way that lumps them together, despite the differences in their relative

maturity and ability, limits each child's opportunity to experience worship. It also severely limits the congregation's blessing from these young worshipers.

What kind of gifts do children offer that congregations should appreciate and nurture? First of all, each age group of children brings with it a certain set of unique qualities. Consider the church's adoration for babies at their baptism, its pride at their confirmation, and its joy in their developing spiritual and natural gifts. What never-to-be-seen-again blessings do the toothless seven year-olds offer, the loving and hug-giving five-year olds, or the inspired nine-year old artists? What innocent comments come from their lips lifting the congregation to laughter during the Children's Sermon or Children's Blessing?

Beyond these general childhood qualities, there reside in our young great abilities to sing and worship. Their voices, properly trained, soar with a clarity that they alone possess, and will all too soon lose. Children easily memorize, and have great ability to remember long passages. Their innocence and trusting natures enable them to learn solos with confidence, speak scriptures with assurance, and lead in various ways with comfort. What a disservice we do to children by limiting their contribution to those moments that solely entertain us or exhibit their "cuteness."

Publishers of children's Christian song literature often reveal an appalling and popular view that children simply cannot discriminate good literature from bad. Choosing to publish music that appeals to the secular tastes of the popular culture shows a great disrespect for children. In contrast, it greatly dignifies a group of children when music directors and church leaders choose appropriate—yet musically and artistically well-written—music for children to sing and play. To quote two wise secular thinkers:

Quality is no less important for children's celebrations than it is for adult or general ones. Perhaps it is even more important when dealing with children, because children are open and in the process of formation.

--Robert W. Hovda

Only the best is good enough for a child.

--Zoltan Kodály

If recognized leaders in secular music education can express the necessity for excellence in choosing music for children, how much more should the church honor our youngest members with high expectations and high tools for worship. In addition, those who teach children, including their musical leaders, need to possess the best musical and educational talent the church can find.

Not only can children minister to the congregation, but the congregation has an obligation to minister to them. In many churches, the membership of the church vows at the time of a child's baptism to help the parents instruct the child so that he or she eventually will choose to follow the Christian faith of their parents. As our children grow and develop, what a better pathway to train them in the ways of the Lord than to welcome them to

become viable, contributing members of our congregations? This hospitable approach will do marvelous things, not only for the present church, but yes, for the church of the future. As these children learn to love the place where God's honor dwells, and as they find their place within it, they will continue to find their way to worship all the days of their lives.
