

## Children in Church

There is a conversation in our parish, as in so many churches around the country, about what role children and youth do, can, and should take in our worship. We've started "5<sup>th</sup> Sunday" Intergenerational Services where children and youth lead the liturgy. Usually for us this means they serve as readers, they 'interpret' the Gospel through a skit or the like, and we choose some of everyone's favorite hymns. The idea, though, is not to make this the Children's Service, but to make the language accessible to all and the service itself more participatory. We are in the early stages.

The clergy and I are gathering a variety of resources for these services: among my favorites are the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer, liturgies from Wales, and the Laughing Bird website from Australia. Our rector is a member and fan of the Iona Community in Scotland, which creates some wonderful liturgical resources.

Our exploration into Intergenerational Worship is fraught on many levels. Normally Sunday School happens during our main service; leaving parents to worship without the distraction of their children's presence. They like it that way. And like any congregation the support from non-parenting adults ranges from "Let the children come," to "I survived sitting silent through church every week why shouldn't they?"

And then there's the question of how to make their participation meaningful to them, and to the rest of the generations. We all love them. We love to see their smiling faces; we love to hear their sweet voices raised in song; **we all think they're adorable**. And therein lies the conflict.

Should children be brought into worship to be cute? Should the goal of their participation be their sweetness? Or is that condescending, patronizing, and minimizing their contribution to our faithfulness? And how does Matthew 19:13-15 come into all of this?

*Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.*

## The Christmas Pageant Question

The fact is, they are cute. Psychology teaches us that they are intentionally created cute so we will keep them and take care of them. And when I asked my grade schoolers to convince me that the Christmas Pageant is more than just a lot of hard work leading to a 18-minute cutefest, here's what they told me:

*"The pageant is our gift to God, to Jesus, to our parents, to our families, to the congregation."*

*"The pageant is part of growing up in this community."*

*"The pageant is how we teach people about what happened in Bethlehem and what a great gift God gave everyone."*

*"If we don't do the pageant, Jesus might think we don't care about Him."*

Needless to say, we are doing the pageant.

And there will be cuteness. And the children are right; their cuteness is a gift to their parents, who persevere through so many un-cute moments in the act of raising them. Their voices in song will go straight to our heartstrings where they will evoke the purity of that tiny babe in a stable all those many years ago. We will raise our own voices with theirs in a moment of communion as we reach out to share in the pure certainty of their faith, and they will show us the way to the kingdom of heaven.

---

*Christina Clark serves as the Family Minister and Youth Leader at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Denver, CO. She has previously written for Adoptive Families Magazine and Mothering.com and is the author of the novel "Little Gods on Earth."*