

AWE: Worship...let the children come!

Children in Worship? But, of course! Jesus said, "Let the children come to me." He didn't say, "...only let the well-behaved, quiet children come." He didn't say, "...only let those old enough to 'understand' what is happening come." No, he said, "Let the children come." And for those who got in the way of children and their path to God, he reserved possibly his harshest, "...whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble, it would be better for that one to have a great millstone fastened around the neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

As I travel around the Diocese, my antennae are always out, observing the ways in which children are included, invited to participate and embraced (or not) in worship. Sometimes I am delighted, at other times I am saddened by what I see. Most often, I recognize room for growth and improvement.

If there is one thing I'm passionate about, it is my conviction that children must be included by Baptism and Eucharist in the Body of Christ from the very start of life. It is desirable that a child never remember a time in which she or he was not welcome at the Lord's Table, and in the assembly of the people for worship. Baptism is full initiation into the church. Education and formation are the ongoing process of mental, spiritual and emotional growth that add depth of meaning, understanding and richness to the primary experience of the sacraments over time.

The "W" in AWE: Children's Ministries stands for Worship. As Baptized members, children are part of the worshipping community. Children have a way of knowing the "awe" of God and can show us the way to Jesus if we only let them.

The goals of the Worship Team of AWE: Children's Ministries are twofold: (1) to provide worship and educational resources for clergy, parishes and parents that raise up worship practices for children and (2) to enable and encourage the full inclusion and participation of children in the life and liturgy of the parish.

We need to let children know that they are important, worthwhile and included. They can carry things, find hidden "treasures," and hand out bulletins. Children can read scripture and lead prayers. They can sing and lead worship. And yes, children can help preach sermons. As they help in families, so can they help in the church. Once we begin, there are almost endless ways to include our children.

Some children of 10 or 11 have the "stage presence" to lead intercessions and read as well as adults. I've watched a 6-year-old help gather the collection and grownups empty the change out of their pockets rather than let him pass by without collecting an offering. Some children have no desire to serve at the altar at any age and being pressed to do so does not help their lives of prayer. Others, however, yearn to touch holy things. One of the best ways to welcome children in the liturgy is not just to create "child roles" for them, but to mix the service of adults and children, as they are able in all server roles, from usher to sacristan or crucifier.

I find myself wondering at times what the connection might be between the voices of those who dislike, fear and resent the challenges of having children present and participating in worship and those who complain that our pews are void of the three “Ts” – teens, twenties and thirties. Is there really any hope for keeping the “Ts” if we banish the 5-year-olds from the most important aspects of our life together?

Our treatment of children in the liturgy, in our homes and in the world is of immense importance to God. We adults need children to teach us about the nature of God’s reign in some things that we can’t learn without them. But more importantly, the children need to know they are welcome and at home in God’s house as well as in God’s arms.

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