

# A Sacramental Start for Children's Ministry

## THE CHILD'S PLACE AT GOD'S TABLE

"We welcome you into the Lord's family. We receive you as fellow members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father, and workers with us in the kingdom of God"

**We welcome you.** These words are spoken by the whole congregation to the newly baptized. Welcoming is not turned over to any one group, such as Sunday school teachers, nursery tenders, or even pastors. Helping people of all ages become active members of a congregation is an ongoing task for the whole church family. A welcoming climate for children in worship shapes their openness to and understanding of the community of faith, not to mention their understanding of God's grace and the sacraments.

**Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:6-9 NRSV).**

**Recite them to your children.** Education for all ages enriches understanding of and appreciation for the benefits of Word and Sacrament. However, education is not a prerequisite to receiving those benefits—they are gifts. Becoming an active church member surely involves education, but membership is much more. Educational and developmental theory tell us that the most powerful educational experiences for children involve actually *doing*, not just *learning about*. And doing then becomes a lifelong, energizing process. The faith we live—at home and away, when we rise and when we lie down—is the faith that shapes us as children of God.

**Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest (Luke 9:4b NRSV).**

**The least among you.** Jesus singled out children—trusting, vulnerable, and open to receiving. It wasn't their intellectual understanding that set them apart as models of faith. Rather, it was their openness to gift, to grace, and to love. The message seems to be: Don't just include them in the family; follow their lead.

**Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized (The Use of the Means and Grace, [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997 1, 41).**

**By invitation of the Lord.** Sacraments are pure gifts, and we Lutherans "get it" when it comes to Holy Baptism. But Holy Communion has been a different story. Inviting children to be full, communing members surely benefits children—but it also benefits adults. That

big invitation shows concretely that God's grace is available to all, whatever their qualifications and understandings. Sharing the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is an opportunity to affirm the child's relationship to God and support the child's participation in the faith community.

***There is no command from our Lord regarding the age at which people should be baptized or first communed.... In all communion practices, congregations strive to avoid both reducing the Lord's Supper to an act effective by its mere performance without faith and narrowing faith to intellectual understanding of Christ's presence and gifts*** (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997], 43).

***There is no command.*** Responsible parishioners, pastors, and parents all need guidance in evaluating cues to young children's readiness to receive Holy Communion. Many of us were raised to believe that participation in Holy Communion requires a bit more than the generous splash of baptism. We very likely received our first communion right after we were confirmed or at the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and so understood it as something of a reward for making it through those years of classes. Tradition gave the impression that the Sacrament of the Altar was a privilege enjoyed by those mature enough to understand and appreciate it.

Over the years church governing bodies have offered basic guidelines for age of first communion. Actual practices have varied in local congregations, although for the past 25 years the trend has been toward extending the invitation to younger and younger children.

### **ABOUT READINESS**

A child's readiness is best determined by a parent or one who knows the child well, in consultation with a pastor. Every child is different, and each will pick up on the significance of the meal at a different point. Use questions like these to help you understand the child and her or his sense of belonging in the faith community, so you can make a decision about readiness.

- Has the child been baptized?
- Is the child comfortable in various locations around the church, including at the altar?
- Will the child extend his or her hands when asked to do so?
- Does the child recognize the pastor and seem able to interact enough with him to receive the elements?
- Is the child aware enough of others in the congregation and their needs to show a degree of respect for their communion experience?
- Are parents or other caregivers prepared to help make the process positive?

Such questions are merely helps for establishing guidelines. None but the first question requires an absolute yes before the child can be considered ready. Use the others to generate discussion, set goals, and direct the preparation children and parents receive.

## **MORE ABOUT CHILDREN AND CHURCH**

### ***It Goes Back to Jesus***

In his wisdom, Jesus used simple encounters with intergenerational groups of people to do what each age needed educationally: he affirmed the trusting faith of the children and modeled the generosity of God's grace for the adults.

### ***No Membership Requirements***

Baptism creates for each of us a place in God's family—and that place guarantees the gifts of faith and forgiveness. Membership in the family itself is a gift, not dependent on pious acts or intellectual achievement. It grows out of parents' and sponsors' faith and trust in God's grace.

### ***Another Home and Family***

Young children have a strong sense of home and family, and so they respond positively to the idea of the church as God's house and the people as members of God's family. Congregations that treat children like family nurture their sense of identity and self-esteem as children of God.

### ***Making Sense of It All***

Young children spend considerable time and energy trying to make sense out of the complexity of life. They are barraged by sights, sounds, tastes, and smells, and must learn through trial and error which concrete messages are most important to help them navigate through their days. The words and gestures of familiar and beloved people, at home and at church, play a key role in helping children continually adjust and refine their understandings to incorporate new experiences. A powerful sensory experience, positive or negative, can easily override a rational explanation. For example, the preschooler who is refused the bread and wine of communion may not be able to accept the verbal reassurance of a blessing.

### ***Part of Worship***

Many children are well nurtured in faith through Christian education but haven't connected education and worship. Encourage families to worship together so children can observe their parents' involvement in the celebration of Word and Sacrament. Familiarity with the flow of worship and the routine of ritual is likely to increase a child's engagement with the workings of the faith community.

### ***A Place for Me***

Children are sensitive to their environment and notice the details that define their surroundings. That awareness and their sense of where they fit affects their level of comfort and security. Taking children on frequent tours of the church to acquaint them with places, symbols, and people will nurture their feeling of belonging and identity.

### ***“Me” to “Us”***

Having a place at God’s table will feel like a party to preschoolers. As they make the shift from “I, Me, and Mine” to “We, Us, and Ours,” they will appreciate the sense of belonging that comes with being included in this wonderfully multigenerational feast.