

'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them'
Inhabiting the Sacred Space: Exploring the Curatorial with
Children

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Abstract

In this paper the practice of co-curating the Eucharist with children is explored. The context is an ongoing research enquiry seeking to address the theological question of what it means for children to be at the centre of Eucharistic worship as an expression of the Kingdom of God. The focus on curating liturgical worship draws upon developments in the field of museum curation. Key concepts are presented: that as an insider researcher I am the subject of my research and that my primary values are questions of justice, discovery and experience. Dialogue partners from the fields of education research and children's spirituality support the key concepts. The argument presented is that the practice of co-curating the Eucharist with children is important in developing worshipping communities with a pilgrim model for discipleship.

Keywords: Co-curation; Curatorial; Eucharist; Spirituality; Taizé; Pilgrim; Godly Play; Discipleship.

Introduction

Swinton and Mowat define reflexive knowing as the deliberate attention researchers give to 'their own processes of constructing the world, with the goal of saying something fresh and new about that personal (or shared) world.'² Two types of reflexivity are identified and they are fundamental to my practical research in parish ministry. Firstly, a personal reflexivity where a previous career as a teacher, a spirituality informed by the Christian Community of Taizé, and my calling to the priesthood are part of an ongoing story: 'that all research is, to an extent, autobiography'.³ Secondly, an epistemological reflexivity where my own story is part of the developing story and 'involved with the research process, not as a distant observer, but as an active participant and co-creator of the interpretive experience'.⁴ Reflexive knowing has

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² J. Swinton and H. Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p.34.

³ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.35.

provided the framework for me to ask questions about my own theological assumptions. Swinton and Mowat see reflexivity as a natural part of the researcher's role, where researcher and participant are essential to each other:

While the researcher's primary task is to describe the encounter, in reality, she is inevitably a co-creator of the mode and content of the encounter. More than that, she is implicitly or explicitly, a co-creator of the narrative that is the product of the research encounter.⁵

Further, journaling allows my voice and the voice of children to be heard.

As a child of nine or ten years old I had a profound religious experience when alone in a church for the first time. I considered the empty space differently. What drew my attention and held it fast was far away in the sanctuary. It shone with blue light. What I felt then and still feel today is very difficult to describe. I felt I was in a very holy place and that it was good to be there. I knew God was there with me. I did not share that experience with anyone until I was much older. I wouldn't have known what to say. What strikes me now is that so much was given through the simple design of light. I have no idea whether others found this helpful in their spiritual journey but I know that it helped me. Something of what was given was the beginning of my personal relationship with God: my first sense of the numinous and the beginning of discipleship. My childhood vicar was not present but he or someone had turned the light on, had prepared the space.

I cannot say whether the person who curated my childhood church in such a particular way had children in mind, but I will argue for an understanding by church communities of the capacity children have to experience God. From this I suggest that the curation of sacred spaces with children is one particular outworking in telling the story of God's work in creation. For the purposes of this article the concept of curating the worship space may be likened to the curation of a work of art for exhibition: the curatorial, the experience of engaging with the worship as it unfolds. There is a spiritual dimension to curation and the curatorial. The spiritual experiences of children often go unrecognised but if we see children as active participants in the ongoing work of making God manifest, we will learn to value these as authentic expressions of God.

In one of my former parishes a traditional Sunday School met in the village hall at the same time as the main service but there was no joining up. Few children attended but the leaders were reluctant to consider other models of ministry with children. One Sunday a month there was a Family Service and the Sunday School did not meet but prepared something for the service. Two families occasionally attended but sometimes there were no children at all. The content was limited by the idea that only a very short and simple liturgy could be hospitable to families. Education in mind and body was highly valued by an aspirational village population but the lack of attendance at Sunday School and Family Services suggested either disin-

⁵ Ibid., p.61.

terest in Christian spirituality or a rejection of what was currently offered. The two city parishes where I minister now, though very different demographically from the village described, share similar challenges. Both appear to be welcoming to children but they play no part in the curatorial of worship.

Concepts and Definitions

My values

One of my key tasks in ministry is to curate the sacred space and the liturgy to enable liturgical worship to happen. This paper draws upon my journal and a literature review to present theological perspectives and describe experiences to show why I am concerned.

Central to my theology and practice is the Eucharist. I believe it is for everyone. I have experienced a denial by others of my values as a parish priest. I am a teacher. Finding creative solutions so all could learn and succeed was central to my philosophy and practice in a former career in education. I am a mother. When my children were small I experienced both the pain of their exclusion from worship and the joy of inclusion. My research is a means to systematically find ways of realising my values in my practice. This account will show this struggle to do so.

The journey so far has involved reflexive journaling of experiences with children in Godly Play and the Eucharist, together with literature research and a Living Theory approach to a research enquiry in my worshipping communities. A Living Theory methodology begins with the values of the researcher practitioner:

Generating evidence involves identifying standards of judgement, which have their basis in what we consider is good. Standards of judgement enable us to make value judgements from a reasoned position.⁶

My research enquiry seeks to address the theological question of what it means for children to be at the centre of Eucharistic worship as an expression of the Kingdom of God: where ‘at this table all are equal and the hungry are fed’.⁷ The key concepts in my framework (fig.1) acknowledge that I am the subject of my research, and that my primary values are questions of justice, discovery and experience in the light of the roles that inform me as a person: mother, teacher and priest. Dialogue partners from the fields of education research and children’s spirituality support the key concepts.

For me this question of justice may be described as a spirituality of liberation: ‘an insistence upon the indivisibility of doctrine, worship and action’.⁸ My enquiry is focussed upon a perceived fault line where the traditional adult-centric view of worship works as a gate keeper to exclude those who do not fit the cultural norm: ‘the

⁶ J. Whitehead and J. McNiff, *Action Research: Living Theory* (London: sage Publications, 2006), p.82.

⁷ M. Perham, *New Handbook of Pastoral Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 2000), p.38.

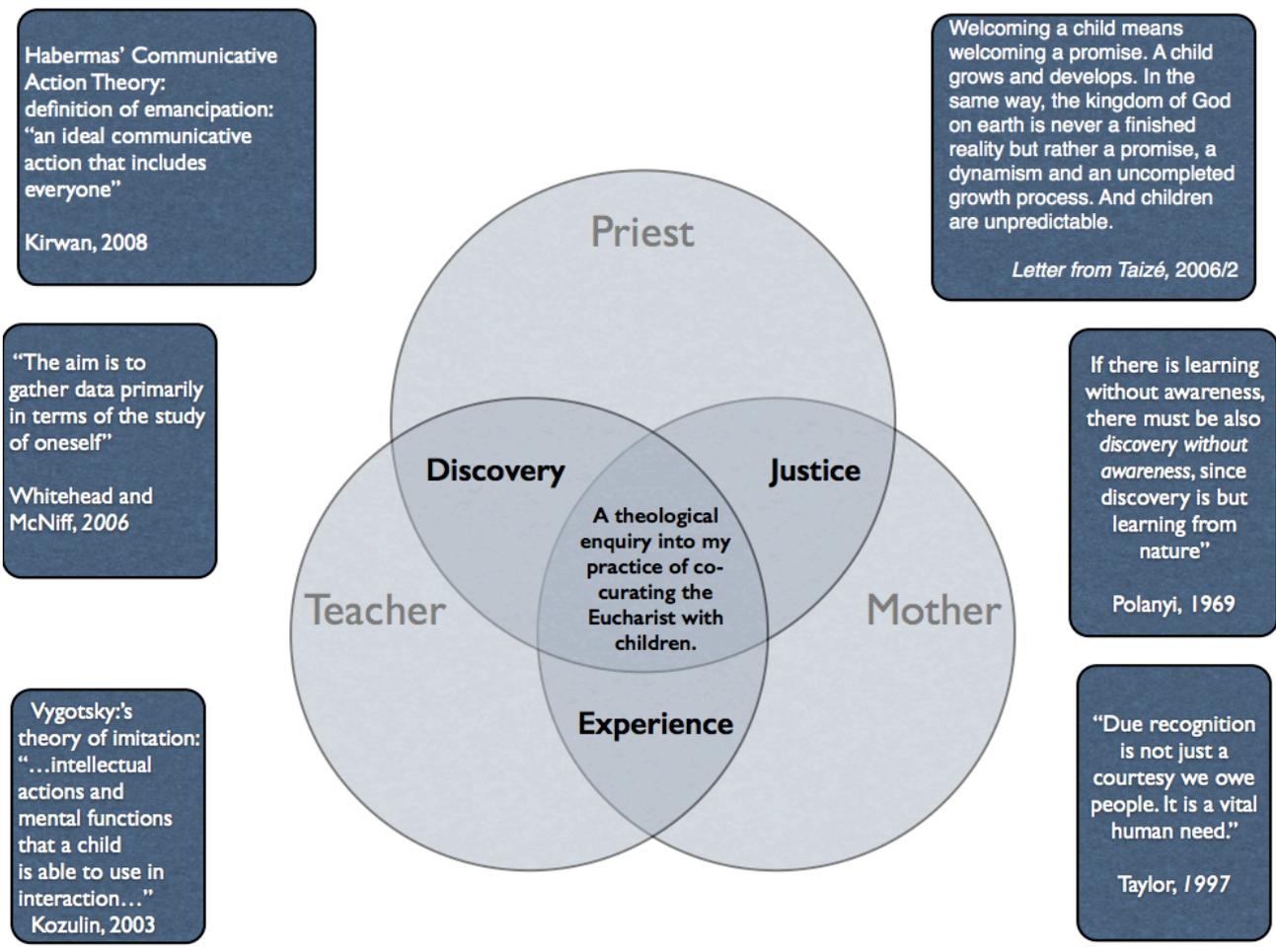
⁸ E. Graham et. al., *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005).

dominant culture is largely unable to change because inclusivity and hospitality occur based on that culture’s initiatives and terms’.⁹

The Eucharist and Co-curation

The Eucharist, also known as Holy Communion or the Mass, is a liturgical form of worship. Perham defines liturgical worship as sharing together through a ‘subtle blend of word, song, movement, gesture and silence’.¹⁰ Eucharistic worship involves the sharing of Holy Communion at its heart and may be regarded as ‘the ultimate place of liturgical formation and transformation’.¹¹ Preparing or curating this kind of worship involves mixing and blending liturgical actions with the purpose of creating ‘a setting where people with their infinite variety of personality and preference can experience something overwhelmingly wonderful that binds and draws together’.¹² This creative process may be likened to the curating of works of art, stories and museum collections.

Figure 1



⁹ Clifton-Soderstrom, M.A., and Bjorlin, D.D., *Incorporating Children in Worship* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014).

¹⁰ Perham, p. 24.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 32.

¹² Ibid., p. 28.

Co-curation in the field of museum curation is seen as increasingly important to learning and engagement: ‘co-curation and similar techniques gathered together under the umbrella of “participation” describe a range of practices in which lay people work to develop displays and programs within museums’.¹³ Involving the general public right from inception through to final display, rather than the traditional invitation to view at the end of the curation process, is seen to deepen the experience of engagement with the artefact/s. Like the curating of works of art, curating liturgical worship is always undertaken with the intention that it has the capacity to be transformational:

...the work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it.¹⁴

Traditionally, worship is curated by the minister for the whole congregation but increasingly there is much more lay involvement in preparing and leading worship. This is so for my churches but those helping to make the worship happen are all adults. This investigation focuses upon the impact of co-curating the Eucharist with children. The theological imperative for the research is rooted in Jesus’s teaching:

Let the little children come to me; do not stop them. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it (Mark 10.14-15, NRSV).

I began to explore the relationship between liturgy, the sacred space and the curating of works of art after reading two books from the ‘emerging church’ movement at the radical edge of developing liturgical practice. In *Curating Worship*. I was struck by the concept of a worship curator as the one ‘to open up a space where anyone can contribute on an equal level’.¹⁵ The model of worship curation presented is that of a facilitator who creates so that others can participate. However, I was surprised however, that the curatorial role was seen to be a solitary task worked out for others - not a shared enterprise with others.

Another seminal book on the topic, *The Worship Curator*, does speak of collaboration, but the worship leader is still essentially the provider, the one in control: ‘it allows me to shape a worship event with both internal and external integrity while still being open ended in the ways I think worship should be’.¹⁶ The worship curator controls the worship event, ‘aggregating’ and ‘pruning’ for the gathered congregation. Like Baker, Pearson’s view of worship curation appears focussed on the presentation skills and power of the curator, which, disappointingly, no matter how exciting and cutting edge it may appear to be, remains situated within a traditional form

¹³ T. Boon, *Co-Curation and the Public History of Science and Technology* (2011) <www.sciencemuseum.org.uk>, last accessed 12 December 2014.

¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 102.

¹⁵ Jonny Baker, *Curating Worship* (London: SPCK, 2010), p. 31.

¹⁶ Pearson, M., *The Art of Curating Worship* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012), pp.33-38.

of liturgical practice where one or a few prepare and present the liturgy for the rest of the worshipping community.

Moreover, the role of the worship curator is seen as a ‘behind the scenes’ worker who creates the space to enable others to enter and experience the worship. The work of the curator happens before the event but she/he retains the power to realise the outcomes of the event. This led me to explore debates about curation and the role of the curator in the secular exhibition world. When reading about developments in co-curation I began to see the concept of worship curation as a theological enterprise. I was interested to read this from a key curator today:

Today, curating as a profession means at least four things. It means to preserve, in the sense of safeguarding the heritage of art. It means to be the selector of new work. It means to connect to art history. And it means displaying or arranging the work. But it's more than that. Before 1800, few people went to exhibitions. Now hundreds of millions of people visit them every year. It's a mass medium and a ritual. The curator sets it up so that it becomes an extraordinary experience and not just illustrations or spatialised books.¹⁷

When striving to achieve best possible liturgical worship the priest or worship leader draws upon these same elements of heritage preservation, new work and tradition. The celebration of the Eucharist, for example, involves the enactment of a liturgical drama that was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper: ‘do this in remembrance of me’; and it speaks of our heritage: ‘this is his story, this is our song’.¹⁸ New liturgies are created for new times; in the Church of England the liturgies and lectionaries for Common Worship were introduced in 2000 to replace the Alternative Service Book. Each different expression though is still connected to the liturgical tradition. For example, there are many Eucharistic Prayers to choose from but each has a five-fold pattern of opening dialogue, anamnesis (remembering), words of institution, epiclesis (invocation of the Holy Spirit), and doxology.

What is even more striking in Obrist’s definition of curation is the fourth element: that display and arrangement are not ends in themselves but are part of a ritual to strive for the extraordinary; like the desire to create best possible worship the curator enables others to transcend the ordinary.

This led me to coin a working definition of liturgical practice:

Co-curation is the participation of the whole worshipping community in the practical process of making manifest the presence of God.

Worship isn’t worship until it is lived or experienced. However, curation and co-curation largely inhabit a world prior to the event. This led me to question the role of

¹⁷ H.U. Obrist, *The Art of Curation* (2014)

<www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/23/hans-ulrich-obrist-art-curator#top>, last accessed 7th July 2016.

¹⁸ Archbishops’ Council, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), p.194.

curation in the event itself and discovered a distinction between curation and the curatorial, between the curation of an event and ‘its enactment, dramatisation and performance’.¹⁹ Martinon states:

‘Curating’ takes place in a promise; it produces a moment of promise, of redemption to come. By contrast, ‘the curatorial’ is what disturbs this process; it breaks up this stage, yet produces a narrative which comes into being in the very moment in which an utterance takes place [...] ‘the curatorial’ is a disturbance, an utterance, a narrative. And within this disturbance, works of art can no longer be a process of interpellation, a conscious or unconscious hailing by some internalised mode of knowledge. Instead, they engage in another process, that of precipitating our reflection, of encouraging another way of thinking or sensing the world.²⁰

Just as the term ‘president’ at a Eucharist is used to convey the theology of presiding on behalf of all those gathered - so taking the focus away from the priest or person to the act itself - *The Curatorial* shifts the focus from those curating worship to those who experience worship. This more appropriately describes the focus of my enquiry into children helping to make the Eucharist happen.

The Spirit of the Child

The Oxford English Dictionary lists a range of definitions for child:

- A young human being below the age of puberty or below the legal age of majority
- A son or daughter of any age
- An immature or irresponsible person
- A person who has little or no experience in a particular area
- The descendants of a family or people
- A person regarded as the product of (a specified influence or environment).²¹

The reference in the title of this paper (NRSV, Mark 10.14) is to the deliberate selection by Jesus of a small child to illustrate the reality of God’s kingdom. The incident of mothers bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed is recorded in all three synoptic gospels. I believe this gospel account gives us four reasons why it is important that children are present in worship: children are signs of the kingdom; intergenerational worship is not obviously seen as part of children’s ministry; children are agents for transformation; it is unethical to exclude children from worship with the rest of the community. This section will look at why it is important for children to be part of the curatorial of the worshipping community.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Martinon (ed.), *The Curatorial - a Philosophy of Curating* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.ix.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "child, n.", 12) a, OED Online, last updated December 2013, last accessed 10 July 2016, <www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/31619 >

The central question discussed by Crossan in his exegesis of Mark's Gospel, is how Mark may be seen to challenge the twelve disciples as leaders of the Church. Crossan suggests that Mark's vision is 'an exaltation of the nameless over the named'.²² The named leaders of the Church come and go, leaving behind a not always creditable legacy because they did not exercise leadership in the way Jesus had taught them. When Jesus places the child in their midst the child represents the nameless, the servant, the powerless. Those who are named, who have power are no longer holding centre stage.

White also counters a romanticised view of the gospel scene by drawing upon the virtue of a childlike spirit, which is not passive or empty but full of spiritual qualities that the church needs. A direct link is made between Jesus' radical teaching on the reality of the Kingdom of God and how this should be expressed in our churches:

...that children, whatever their age, are not only active participants in the unfolding story but are also essential for a true reading of the Gospel, understanding the identity and person of Jesus Christ, modelling the way of the cross, and representing the radical nature of ecclesial community.²³

Barclay's discussion of what Jesus means when he says that the Kingdom of God consists of those who are like children suggests a range of qualities: 'a sense of wonder [...] unquestioning trust, instinctively to obey, to forgive, and to forget'.²⁴ This 'childlike spirit' is the only way we gain entry to the kingdom.

Nye uses the term 'relational consciousness' to describe this childlike spirit or 'core spirit' of the child.²⁵ In her action research in two Midlands primary schools, Nye identifies this core theme of spirituality existing along all parts of a continuum from that of children with no religious experience to those with some. The core value presented was the revelation of the child in relation to self, or to others, or to God, or to the supernatural. In trying to express deep feelings the children struggled with the limitations of language but their responses were always 'in relationship with'. A fundamental concept for the Christian belief in a Trinitarian God is the calling to be in relationship. Hay sees Nye's identification of relational consciousness as the key outcome of her practical research into children's spirituality is 'a way out of the straightjacket that currently binds our ethical and religious institutions'.²⁶

Nye identifies six criteria for nurturing the spiritual experiences of children: space, process, imagination, relationship, intimacy, and trust.²⁷ These are applied to the nurturing of spiritual foundations and spiritual practices.²⁸ Many of the exam-

²² Crossan, J.D., *The Power of Parable: How fiction by Jesus became fiction about Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2012), p.175.

²³ K. White, "'He Placed a Little Child in the Midst": Jesus, the Kingdom, and Children', in M. Bunge (ed.), *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), p.356.

²⁴ W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press 2001), pp.268-269.

²⁵ R. Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), p. 109.

²⁶ D. Hay, *Religious Experience Today* (London, Cassell, 1990), p. 172.

²⁷ Nye, p. 41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-70.

ples given are from her experiences in using Godly Play: a programme that she describes as ‘a highly sophisticated approach to Christian spiritual nurture’ based upon the art of wondering, which can be applied to all kinds of encounters with children.²⁹

However, in the Eucharist it is unusual to see children preparing the sacred space or helping to make the worship happen. To see children as role models for the whole worshipping community means children being involved in the generation of sacred spaces that make possible encounters with God and with each other in worship. Informed by Nye’s six criteria (S.P.I.R.I.T) co-curation with children may also be shown to be a spiritual practice:

- in involving the offering of a potentially holy SPACE where God may be encountered;
- in the PROCESS of entering into the on-going creative work of God;
- in exercising the IMAGINATION in creating ways of God to be with children and adults and for children and adults to be with God;
- in the opportunities created for the building of RELATIONSHIPS with God and with each other;
- in the potential for INTIMATE encounters with God;
- in the TRUST involved in the shared participation of working to make God manifest.

Taizé Spirituality

One year my daughter, then aged six, couldn’t wait to tell me about the pilgrimage she had been on that morning with her Taizé animation group. They had explored the church, all of it. She dragged me in to show me. “And did I know that it’s a big boat?” She pointed to the sails, the cross that is the mast, the open bricks and baskets with lights that were the fishing nets and baskets full of fish. “And we are on the boat!” No, I had not seen any of that. Now, each time the Prayer in Taizé begins I feel we are setting sail.

Taizé has been described as a parable of community. Central to community life is the worship. Common Prayer begins with the iconic ringing of the bells. People flow into the church from every direction and find a place to sit on the floor. As the space fills there is a settling into the silence. It is as though we are all waiting expectantly for something to happen. The process of arriving, settling and waiting, is like the preparation for a voyage. Setting out into the deep waters of prayer with others of all ages - including the very young - evokes a parable of community where all are journeying together in worship and also deep within themselves. Children are invited, not just as fellow pilgrims, but also as guests of honour to sit with the prior of the community in the very centre of the church. The liturgy tells a story through the curation of objects and people and the shared experience of inhabiting sacred space. Taizé’s spirituality is based on pilgrimage; it is what governs the community’s faith,

²⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

understanding of scripture and its hospitality. The curation of the church in Taizé has evolved over time to respond to the different cultural backgrounds of the pilgrims. The result is an invitation to journey in safety into the mystery of the incarnation. The curation of the sacred space with its sails and fishing baskets is an icon of the process of journeying.

Taizé's focus on a pilgrim model has ensured that the curation of the sacred space for worship is inviting to all. Hospitable worship is reliant upon creating a public space or geography where the actions, rituals and rhythms enable any pilgrim on the journey to feel they are in a safe place.

A Pilgrim Model

In 1988 the seminal report of the British Council of Churches Consultative Group on Ministry among Children heralded a thorough re-examination of church practice in its work with children. Two inherited models of nurturing children in the faith are first explored: the school model (the model clung to by the former parish described earlier) and the family model. The family model for church involves the role of parent - that is, those working directly with children and by extension the whole adult worshipping community - and the role of the child in the community, which also by extension, can include adults who are seekers or new to the faith. This 'child' group is treated specially and differently to the adult group.³⁰ Mercer's research amongst congregations in North America concludes that the responsibility for the care of children is the work of the whole church, not just mothers and women.³¹ Mercer dreams of a utopian church where 'it's liturgical, missional, and community life represent[s] common struggle and celebration among all - including children', where everything that happens there happens with and not for children.³² There are many suggestions for good practice arising from Mercer's research but these still conform to what makes a good church family rather than what it is to be a disciple on the road. It is constructed as 'doing good church' but where is it going?³³

In contrast the BCCCG report advises a third model for nurturing children in the faith. A pilgrim model sees all in the church community: adults and children, learning from 'shared experience and shared stories'.³⁴ The *Children in the Way* report points out that the Bible's more frequently used social construct is not the family but the wider community of Israel and of the church. These are used both physically and symbolically to express the story of the Creator God's relationship with his people as pilgrim people journeying with God. Much of the biblical writers' reflections upon a relationship with God suggest that it is at times of journeying when the people are closest to God; where trust in God's guidance and saving grace is key. The whole people of God without differentiation are journeying together: 'being the pilgrim

³⁰ British Council of Churches Consultative Group on Ministry among Children, *Children in the Way: New Directions for the Church's Children* (London: National Society and Church House Publishing 1988), pp.74-5.

³¹ J.A. Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (Danvers: Chalice Press, 2005), p. 237.

³² *Ibid.*, p.242.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

³⁴ BCCCG, p.34.

people means that all are called to the journey, and all involved in the teaching and learning on the way'.³⁵ Adopting a pilgrim model means accepting that children are also called to journey as part of the whole body of Christ. When the whole worshipping community journeys together we learn from each other about what it means to be part of that body.

Co-curating with Children

Shaping Community

For modern educationalists the spiritual development of children is increasingly seen alongside their cognitive and emotional development. Vygotsky's wisdom is drawn upon seeing cognitive development as 'an acquisition of symbolic tools' for a child's 'imagination and emotional development'.³⁶ In 2010 the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) published its new syllabus for RE in schools. Influences of Vygotsky can clearly be discerned in its approach to teaching RE today, with an emphasis on 'enquiring', 'investigating', 'understanding', 'questioning', 'exploring' and 'reflecting' as the learning vehicles to 'developing [...] [their] own sense of identity in terms of beliefs and values'.³⁷ Co-curating also involves giving children 'symbolic tools' for their spiritual development.

Corsaro's sociological study of childhood (2011) offers the idea of 'interpretive reproduction' to describe 'the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society'.³⁸ Children do not just internalise the society and culture around them, they are 'actively contributing to cultural production and change'.³⁹ The problem is that in many of our worshipping communities we do not recognise the value that children can contribute to the journey. Children may only be seen as Christians in the making rather than as fellow pilgrims who have much to teach adults.

On a Prayer Walk for Year 6's, I first invited the children to look up, down or out to find something they would like to focus on. We stood in silence for a minute to allow each child to consider their object or thing in their own way then I invited one of the children to read a prayer. Three very reluctant boys began to take an interest because the prayer was quirky and had an amusing cartoon illustration. We passed the grave of a nine-year-old boy. The children wanted to talk about death, sharing their thoughts and memories. We moved on to objects ranging from the religious to those with no obvious connotations. I asked the children to choose one and to find a quiet space to sit and to let their object speak to them. There was an intentional choosing of a quiet space alone in the long grass. The silence extended to several minutes and when called the children drifted back and thoughtfully laid their objects down. What was interesting was the seriousness with which the children reflected afterwards upon the experience. A

³⁵ Ibid., pp.76-77.

³⁶ See A. Kozulin et al., (eds.) *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.4-5.

³⁷ Rotherham SACRE, *Locally Agreed Syllabus* (Rotherham: Rawmarsh City Learning Centre, 2010), pp. 6-10.

³⁸ W. Corsaro, *The Sociology of Childhood* (Bloomington: Sage Publications, Inc, 3rd Ed, 2011), p. 20.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

paradigm shift appeared to have taken place from the everyday and sceptical to a more spiritual dimension. How had this come about? No demands were made on the children to do or to be. They were given space to reflect on their own in whatever way they wished. The importance for children's ministry in this context is that we were all learning together, journeying together, inhabiting a space that became intentionally sacred through ritual and prayer and where story unfolded so that this became our shared story. The bonds created spoke to me of the covenant between God and his people.

Corsaro continues by exploring 'the importance of language and cultural routines and the reproductive nature of children's evolving membership in their culture'.⁴⁰ This inhabiting of the language of the culture and its routines, which together shape the development of that culture, applies as much if not more so to the society of the church community. When people are asked to describe God a familiar response is 'God is love'. A less obvious response would be 'God is beautiful'. From another perspective on creating holy spaces, Billings writes of the need today to rediscover an 'Anglican aesthetic', posing the rhetorical question: 'do Anglicans believe that God is "beautiful" and therefore God is best expressed in beauty?'⁴¹ He argues that creative attention needs to be paid to 'a more holistic account of human spirituality', where 'all our senses will be involved, and our imagination, and our affections'.⁴²

Godly Play

Godly Play is in keeping with the pilgrim model. The programme 'uses symbols and objects as well as words [...] values process, openness and discovery [...] encourages people to make meaning for themselves'.⁴³ My work with Godly Play has shown that children's spiritual experiences are as credible as any adult's and that children naturally inhabit sacred spaces and contribute to making God manifest. We are co-curators participating in the curatorial of Godly Play together. This is a process that insists upon the relational nature of worship: not worship for but worship with. The relational aspect allows for spontaneity and freedom of expression because co-creation is the practical process of co-creation: the dynamic of God with us, with each other. Not allowing this to happen in our ministry with children is to say that children cannot participate fully in the process of creation.

I am nervous. I do not look at the children but sense throughout their absorption with the objects. There is a gasp when the wolf is tossed down between the good shepherd and the sheep. During the wondering questions one little boy talks about his Gran who has died. Though the story did not mention death, the presence of the wolf, the prospect of being lost and the actions of the good shepherd in saving the sheep, has led to the boy's thought that his Gran is not lost but safe. As a first experience of the power of this style of story-telling my feelings are of elation. It worked! But what worked?

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ A. Billings, *Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts: The Role of the Church in a time of no Religion* (London: SPCK 2004), p. 174.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Godly Play, *Welcome* (2016) <www.godlyplay.co.uk> last accessed 30 May 2016.

Nouwen, writing about creative ministry, describes teaching as a redemptive process where the teacher depends completely on the student to ‘give trust, confidence and friendship’.⁴⁴ My experience has been exactly this, and through a relationship that I could not conceive as possible with children I did not know or who were so young. In Godly Play story-telling, I have to let go and entrust the session to the children. I do not know where it will lead. Is this one obstacle to letting children become full participants in mainstream worship? Adults keep children at a distance because they cannot control the consequences of letting children in. Godly Play’s open-endedness is emblematic of a pilgrim model for worship where everyone sets out on the journey together, not quite sure where it will lead but receiving from each other along the way.

In the curatorial of Godly Play the children and I become co-curators of a ritual. Godly Play involves the rituals of story telling and the ritual of objects through a journey or process of wondering. A Godly Play session begins with a story presentation where all present sit together on the floor in a circle. The spirit of enquiry begins immediately with the act of revealing the objects that will play a part in the story and what they may represent. Wondering questions are key. The focus of what is being learnt shifts from the teacher or leader to the objects at the centre of the story. The session involves all present focusing upon the objects as the story evolves. The leader follows his/her own movements with the objects. Very little eye contact is made during the story presentation: ‘keeping your own eyes on the material in the centre of the circle will help you “disappear” into the story it embodies’.⁴⁵ The presentation concludes with more open-ended ‘wondering’ questions, such as ‘I wonder if we took a bit of this story away would it make any difference?’ Here the sense of journeying together to enter deeply into the mystery of the story is at the heart of what takes place at Godly Play. There follows an unprescribed response session where some children may opt to play with the story objects, often re-telling in their own way, while others may choose to paint or use modelling materials or write. The purpose is not to make something in order to take home but to work in a creative space through imaginative play.

I think if we had our story straight after our feast, then our creative play, we would have time to give the news at the end as well

(Phoebe, aged 5)

In my ministry I am learning to offer and then to let go. At a weekly after-school Godly Play session a pattern or ritual emerged. The children called the session ‘Come and C at Half Past Three’. They rushed in for snacks and free play while the parents had a cup of tea. The church became an adventure playground. Then we moved through the ‘door’ provided by the chancel screen. The children usually decided when they were ready for this. After the story presentation and creative response time that followed, the children had begun a ritual of ‘reading the news.’ In

⁴⁴ H. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1978), p. 12.

⁴⁵ J. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: Volume 1* (New York: Morehouse Education Resources, 2002), p. 57.

their imaginations they saw the potential of the facing choir stalls as TV studio and viewers at home. The children were not able to write sentences yet, but they decorated sheets of A4 paper to look like writing and held them up to look professional. Bits of the Godly Play story began to emerge. This became more pronounced when the desert bag was used to tell the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the people of God. The children were giving us their versions of the stories again in their news. We learnt lots more about how hot and cold and dry and dangerous the desert can be, and always to be avoided unless you absolutely have to go there.

In Godly Play we co-curate. Each session is a shared enterprise that opens up possibilities for encounters with God. We are pilgrims at play. If Godly Play embodies co-curation then where does the journey take us? Godly Play demonstrates the art of the possible in engaging with children in worship.

Intergenerational Eucharist

David Hay argues that we are all innately spiritual but our sense of this becomes lost as we grow up.⁴⁶ As a Church therefore we need to help people of all ages to rediscover this core spirituality but also to address the very real question of why it may be lost in the first place. Hay describes religious experiences as self-authenticating. Each is valid in and of itself without recourse to external factors to give justification to the experience. My own childhood encounter with God, the religious experiences of the children on the Prayer Walk and in Godly Play sessions are authentic expressions that do not need any external justification. Hay states that the focus of researchers should be on the 'perceptions, awareness and response of children' to ordinary activities that may signal moments of transcendence.⁴⁷ My dream is to see the Church focus upon ministry with children as fellow pilgrims in the on-going process of the curatorial.

On Christmas Eve at 5.00pm we gathered for a Crib Service. It involved a journey to Bethlehem. The church had been curated with 'stations' and was in semi-darkness. The children received a party bag as they arrived with things they would need for the journey and for things they would receive. There were also many adults: parents and those who had come without children. In order to begin the journey we needed lights to guide us and the children discovered finger lights in their bag. The children had the light so they had to lead the way. The stations could only be revealed properly to the whole congregation by the children shining their lights onto the picture of the annunciation, the bare crib, the visitation to the shepherds. The liturgy was animated by the children. We were co-curating.

My crib service intention was to see the spirituality of Godly Play happening in the context of the whole family of the church gathered for worship. The process of pilgrimage is embodied in community. Vanier describes community as covenant: 'to enter into a covenant is to discover that there are bonds between us and our God, that we are made to be his children and to live in his light'.⁴⁸ It not only makes de-

⁴⁶ Hay, pp. 32-39.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

⁴⁸ J. Vanier, *Community and Growth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1979), p. 42.

mands on each person to be responsible for others in the community but it is also accepting that we are vulnerable and weak and need to be carried by others. This covenantal relationship flows between us and God and each other. Vanier insists that in entering into this covenant we enter into the heart of God and God's heart rests with the poor, the weak, the vulnerable. This is true, but part of a new ethical framework of co-curation with children must be to see the child in full and equal partnership. A reorientation of ecclesial practice would see that we must all become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. Not because children are weak and vulnerable but because they are more authentically themselves. They have not unlearned, lost or forgotten their innate spirituality.

Perham (2000, p.86) speaks of the Church's failure 'to find a formula that integrates all ages' and outlines four working principles:

1. Children 'belong to the liturgy...by virtue of their baptism, to the Church of today';
2. Children 'belong at the altar, sharing the sacrament';
3. Children need not be absent from the liturgy because of its demands in terms of wonder, awe and mystery: 'for they have these in greater measure than adults';
4. Children need to 'both see the action and be part of it'.⁴⁹

Ramshaw and Browning argue that the creating of worship, when seen as the work of one person, places the other in a child-parent relationship rather than as 'co-travellers'.⁵⁰ The issue is a question of shared ownership for ritual acts, which can only be realised with wide and active participation.⁵¹ This is as true for adults as it is for children. One purpose of worship and ritual acts is to encounter mystery. By seeing this as a co-operative enterprise there is a mutual recognition that what is being sought is something other: that God is present and at work.⁵²

By children participating fully in worship with the rest of the community their sense of belonging is reinforced, they begin to inhabit the sacred space and learn through ritual acts a sense of the pattern or road map of worship as a journey. Telling my story and the Church's story of ministry with children is steeped in the tradition of the story of God's people as pilgrims. But this needs to go further. Becoming pilgrims is what we are called to do. But we are also called to walk this journey in relationship with God and with each other in community. Co-curation is an outward sign of this journey in progress. For Willimon spiritual development is directly related to pastoral care. The concern is with the loss or undervaluing of the pastoral dimension of worship that should be 'a corporate and incorporating event'.⁵³ Through the performance of ritual acts we are enabled to situate ourselves

⁴⁹ Perham, pp. 86-87.

⁵⁰ E. Ramshaw and D. Browning, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp.33-35.

⁵³ See W.H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), pp.28-31.

differently - 'we stand outside ourselves to better see ourselves' - as it is 'out of such experimental, playful, ritualised encounters' that we grow and flourish in the faith.⁵⁴

Amelia, aged 10, has begun to come to some Holy Communion services with her Gran. Following an enquiry about Confirmation I suggested Amelia might like to be admitted to Holy Communion as a first step. This village church still follows a mixed-mode approach with children being prepared to receive Holy Communion at a parent's request or waiting until the age of Confirmation: usually aged eleven or above. Amelia was delighted at the prospect. I welcomed Amelia in the service, together we shared the Peace with everybody and went to the altar. We prepared the table, said the Prayer of Preparation together and I began the ritual of the Eucharistic Prayer, raising my hands as my usual practice. At my side I realised that Amelia was following my movements: my hands and her hands. This was not rehearsed but a spontaneous response by Amelia to the unfolding ritual. We were co-curating.

The value I have found in co-travelling with children is a Christian spirituality embodied in the concept of pilgrimage and of participation in ritual acts which informs a theology of co-curation where the active participation of the whole worshipping community is involved in The Curatorial of making manifest the presence of God.

Conclusions

This initial study suggests the importance to the Church of research into co-curation with children and its wider application for the whole worshipping community. The reality, however, is the need for the willingness of adults to see their ministry with children as a spiritual process, not a means-to-an-end product. The outcome of the 'Children in the Way' report was to promote the pilgrim model for ministry with children. The challenge is to help the Church move from an adult centric view of the worshipping community to one where children are welcomed as active participants in intergenerational liturgical worship. My on-going research seeks to discover whether co-curating the Eucharist with children is important to the belonging, becoming, believing of a worshipping community.

www.theologyandministry.org

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp.177-178.

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