



CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY AND MINISTRY WITH CHILDREN & YOUTH BY ANTHONY B. ROBINSON

Thanks to the folks at *The Education Connection* for inviting me to share some thoughts about 1) how congregations that seek to be more vital include younger members, and 2) what those who work in these ministry areas need to know about contributing to the vitality of their congregations.

How do congregations seeking to be more vital include children and youth?

I know it's a tough sell but my sense is that children (and adults) need *both* worship and education, *not either* worship or education. To worship is to be in the presence of God in a focused way so that we grow in our awareness of God's presence in all times and places. Education (or formation) means learning the wisdom and ways of the Christian faith and tradition.

In thinking about worship and the presence and participation of children and youth, I have to acknowledge my reservations about the "children's sermon." While some people do the children's sermon masterfully, too often it becomes a time when children are put on display, even manipulated, for the entertainment of adults.

Is there an alternative? I think so. It is to involve children in the worship of the church and in worship leadership in ways that fit their age and stage. Children can

be prepared to welcome folks to worship as ushers or greeters. Children can be prepared to lead parts of the liturgy or read Scripture. Children's groups or choirs can sing in worship and lead the congregation's singing. Children can write or pray prayers in worship. Children can be involved in preparing for communion (baking and offering the bread, for instance) and children can serve communion. My point is, instead of singling children out, integrate them in. Note also my repeated use of the word "prepare." Take these roles and tasks seriously, as well as the children you ask to do them, by offering and expecting training, preparation, and practice.

In other areas of life, sports for example, people ask a lot of kids by way of preparation and practice. Usually kids respond well to that. Another way to put this is that kids will tend to take seriously and treat as significant what we adults take seriously and treat as significant.

Will there be times in worship when children aren't excited or totally engaged? Yes, and surprise: there are times when adults aren't either. And it's also true that

sometimes, even when we aren't planning on it or prepared for it, the Holy Spirit gets at us—adults and children. Moreover, worship is the kind of practice that "gets in your bones." It's deeper than conscious or conceptual knowing alone. This is to say there are things going on in worship even when we haven't planned or produced them. God is at work. Trust that.

Another way vital congregations include children and youth is in the community service ministry of the church. There's reason to believe that when kids do service work alongside their parents or other adults, it has a big impact on their faith and values. Congregations can work at identifying projects

that are appropriate for whole family participation, such as serving a meal at a homeless shelter or visiting elderly folks who aren't able to get out much. Some congregations have great experiences with

youth mission trips, but more ought to try intergenerational mission trips. In such ventures, it's good to encourage some brief times of sharing and reflection, perhaps at the conclusion of such an experience, asking people to talk with one another about three

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questions: What did I give? What did I receive? Where was God in this experience?

What do those who work in these ministry areas need to know about contributing to the vitality of their congregation?

I'll limit myself to two thoughts. First, those who work in faith formation for children and youth have an educational role in relation to the whole church, which is to remind the entire community of faith that we are all involved in teaching our faith in most everything we do. In other words, we can't delegate the formation of children's faith to the Sunday School classroom or teacher alone. It is the work of a whole, engaged community. Think, "It takes a whole village to

raise a child." And "raising" here doesn't just mean watching kids grow up; it means teaching a way of life and a perspective on life. Clarence Jordon of Koinonia Farms famously said, "You can't raise live chicks under dead hens." Faithful young people are nurtured by an entire community that is intentional about faith formation and engaged in its faith.

In this regard, people doing ministry with children and youth can provoke a useful conversation by asking a congregation what its learning outcomes are or should be. Just having that conversation is a good thing; coming up with answers is icing on the cake. The "answers" for one congregation I served were as follows: 1) we want our young people to know the Biblical story and stories, 2) we

want them to know the hymns of the church, and 3) we want them to build friendships with other children and with adults in the church. Those were our learning outcomes.

And a final thought about vital congregations for those who work in children and youth ministries: Resist the impulse to create a separate fiefdom, a program whole and unto itself. Yes, there is a time and place for age-level breakouts, but as a general bent, bend toward integration. Move toward being a community. Rather than seeing the church as a well-oiled machine made up of different and distinct parts or departments, move toward seeing the church as a living system for faith growth and formation.

ANTHONY B. ROBINSON is the editor of the Congregational Vitality series from The Pilgrim Press, an ordained pastor and teacher in the United Church of Christ, and a national consultant/speaker to congregations seeking renewal and transformation. For more information, visit www.anthonybrobinson.com.

