

Dialoguing with Children on Liturgy and Worship

Thor Strandenaes

The impossible dialogue, or the untried one?

Dialogue with children on content, form, and celebration in Christian worship is not impossible. Experience from such dialogues over three decades has taught me so much. Normally dialogue is untried because it has been ignored, neglected or not been given the priority it deserves. The following contribution will argue for the necessity of establishing regular dialogue on worship and liturgy with children within the church, for drawing up some guidelines for such dialogue, and showing what may be achieved through dialogue with children.

Although the focus here will be on various aspects of dialogue with children in the Christian worshipping community, the findings may have bearings on child participation in worship in other religious communities as well. The human dignity and resources of children are emphasized and thus their right to be seen, heard and felt in various ways in religious community life. Likewise, even though Lutheran worship in Scandinavia is the focus, the points made are likely also to be relevant for worship in the life of those from other denominations and churches elsewhere.

Reasons for engaging in dialogue with children on worship and liturgy

A dialogue with children on worship and liturgy needs to be theologically motivated if it is to meet with general acceptance in the church. But inspiration to engage in such dialogue may also be the result of recognizing

the universal rights of the child and a willingness to learn from international dialogue experience.

A theologically motivated dialogue

Dialogue with children on worship and liturgy may be theologically motivated in the following four ways: through evidence from Scripture, through the church's understanding of baptism, from the ecumenical creeds and from ecumenical efforts to recognize children's status in the church and their importance for its worship life and ministry.

New Testament perspectives on the status of children

In the teachings of Jesus, children are presented as models of faith, as representing himself and as persons who are in need of nurture if their faith is to grow. Thus in Jesus' famous saying about letting the children come to him and not hinder them he gives as the reason that "the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10, 13-16; Matt 19,13-15; Luke 18,15-17). Jesus accepts what they are, namely those to whom the Kingdom has been given. The children are brought to the centre so that the adults may recognize the new order. He presents these little ones as models of how to receive the Kingdom. As Ulrich Becker has aptly put it, "Not the child's transformation to adulthood but the adult's transformation to childhood determines Jesus' words about the child."¹

In another saying it becomes clear that, by receiving a little child in Jesus' name, it is Jesus himself one receives, and God by whom Jesus was sent (Mark 9,33-37; Matt 18,1-5; Luke 9,46-48). Jesus therefore warns against treating badly any of the little ones who believe in him (Mark 9,41f; Matt 18,6-10; cf. Luke 17,1-2). Finally, Jesus' great commission obliges the disciples not only to baptize but also to further instruct all – including children – in the faith and teaching which he brought: "...make all nations my disciples...and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you..." (Matt 28,19f). Children are to be accepted for baptism and to remain disciples, learning the secrets of the Kingdom of God, practising their faith and being nourished in it.

¹ Ulrich Becker, "The Child in Theology and Church", *The Ecumenical Review*, 31, 1979, p. 239.

A similar balance between acceptance, on the one hand, and nurture and growth on the other, is found in Paul's letters. Paul teaches, "when we were baptized into union with Jesus Christ we were baptized into his death" (Rom 6,3; cf. Gal 3,27). Hence also the children enter this union in baptism. On the other hand Paul maintains that "as Christ was raised from the dead in the splendour of the Father, so also we might set our feet upon the new path of life" (Rom 6,4; cf. Eph 4,22ff). Here lies the motivation for continued renewal, nurture, learning and growth in faith. While accepting the basic oneness and equal status of all baptized – children and adults alike – Paul maintains the need for all to develop in faith and its expressions according to the standards of the new life: "When I was a child, my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things" (1 Cor 13,11; cf. 1 Cor 3; Eph 5,8-10; 6,1-4; 1 Thes 2,11f; 5,5-11; 1 Pet 1-2). So, Paul's teaching maintains the same fruitful tension as the gospels between acceptance as members of Christ's body on the one hand and the need to live and grow in the life of faith on the other.

From this follows that the status of children in the church as a worshipping community is fundamentally equal to that of Christians belonging to other age groups. Children cannot be accepted for baptism without also being admitted into the growing and nurtured life of the baptized Christian community. As baptized members of the church they have received the Holy Spirit – and thereby also spiritual gifts, in all their variety, to be shared and cherished by the entire community of believers, and to be used for building up the church (Rom 12,4ff; 1 Cor 12,12ff; Eph 4,7ff). Just as adults and youth in the worshipping community have received their measurement of spiritual gifts, so have the children. They have become members of the body of Christ and belong to the community of believers both to share with it and to receive from it. The community therefore must have the same expectations to the existence and use of the gifts of the Spirit among its children as it has to those of its other members. If their status is to be adequately recognized, children cannot be treated as mere objects to be dispensed with at random but must be treated as authentic Christians in their own right, and therefore also as receiving and contributing subjects in the community, with gifts as well as needs.

The church's understanding of baptism

Although the baptismal rituals of the Lutheran church may distinguish between how adults and children are received for baptism, no distinction is made whatsoever between what children and adults receive in the sacrament.² When a child or an adult in the Church of Norway is to be baptized, the minister introduces the holy rite by saying that “through baptism God will give you/him/her a share in his salvation and receive you/him/her in his Christian church”.³ After the baptism, the minister says the following words: “The Almighty God has now given you his Holy Spirit, made you his child and taken you into his believing congregation. May he strengthen you with his grace until eternal life. Peace be with you.”

The baptismal ritual clearly shows that the church recognizes that all who are baptized have received the Holy Spirit, and that they have become children of God, and are members of his church. Thus they all belong to the community of believers, and no distinction is made with regard to social status, sex or age. Obviously, by accepting children for baptism, the church expects them to remain in the church, and to be nurtured in their faith by learning to pray, sharing in worship, and receiving Holy Communion. But this same expectation concerns those who are accepted for baptism as adults.⁴ Admittance to baptism and nurture in faith are juxtaposed. The first step is to be followed by the next. In this pilgrimage of faith, which develops from baptism, belonging to and partaking in the community worship are vital for each person's development as a Christian, not only the child's. And, since all growth needs nurturing, the needs of children are of no less importance than those of youth and adults. As members of one body they all need and must take nourishment, just as they are all needed

² The following words of Welcome and Peace are used after baptism in the Church of England for both adults and children: '[Minister] There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism: *N* and *N*, by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. *All*: We welcome you into the fellowship of faith; we are children of the same heavenly Father; we welcome you.' *Common Worship. Services and Prayers for the Church of England*. London: Church House Publishing, 2000, p 361.

³ My translation. For this and the following references to the baptismal ritual, see *Gudstjenestebok for Den norske kirke*, I-II, Oslo: Verbum 1996, vol. I, p 129-133; vol. II, p 35-40. Similar expressions are used in e.g., the baptismal rituals of the Church of Sweden and the Church of Denmark.

⁴ This expectancy is voiced in the admonition to the godparents both at child and adult baptisms in the Church of Norway prior to the confession of the Apostles' Creed and the act of baptism itself (*Gudstjenestebok for Den norske kirke*, vol. I, p 130; vol. II, p 37).

for the body to grow, move and be alive. Their common point of reference is that they are all one in Christ and belong to him (cf. Gal 3,27f; 1 Cor 3,21-23; 12,27; 2 Cor 5,17). As such they have equal access to the Father and are one in community with all other members. Without the presence of the children in the church's worship, the worship will be lacking in fullness. Without their continued presence in the community the body suffers. Hence the worshipping community needs them, just as they need to be part of the worship themselves.

The ecumenical Creeds

The confessing subject in the ecumenical creeds – whether in the singular of the Apostolic Creed ('I believe') or in the plural used in the Nicene Creed ("We believe) – is the entire church, and therefore all its individual members, be they adults, youth or children. Truly, as long as a child cannot consciously join in the church's expression of its faith, the church professes the creed on its behalf. In nurturing faith through worship and teaching, the community says the creed(s) together with the child and gradually brings the child to consciously recognize the creed(s) as a true expression also of his or her faith. Gradually, when the child has learnt the creed(s), he or she says it together with the other members of the worshipping community, affirming actively that this is a shared faith of all members.

Expressions of faith in the creeds like "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints..." (the Apostles' Creed), and "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins..." (The Nicene Creed) equally witness to the same status of all Christians as belonging to the one church of Christ, as well as to the validity of one baptism, whether performed on children or adults. In this way the faith of the church through the centuries has reiterated the voice of the New Testament testimony, and continues to do so.

Both the texts of the New Testament, the baptismal rituals and the ecumenical creeds thus confirm the oneness of the church and do not discriminate children as being of less value or as second class Christians. As the rite of entrance into the Kingdom of God, baptism does not discriminate among people because of sex, age, nationality or social status. Although baptism presupposes a transformation of life and nurture of faith to follow, this is not a precondition for children's baptism alone but pertains

to all baptized members of the Christian community. If any distinction is to be made, it is that children are models of faith, for entering and receiving the Kingdom. However, like the rest of the community they need to continue as disciples of Christ after baptism, to be on a pilgrimage of faith, constantly receiving nourishment, growing in knowledge and witness. And, since the joint worship of the Christian community is the place *par excellence* for expressing the common faith, and for growing, children need to be part of this worship along with the rest of God's family. As the status of all Christians is being children of God, the younger Christians need to be together with youth and adult members of this extended family. And if children need the gifts of older members of this family to live and grow, these in turn need the presence and gifts of the young ones, since true community can only be expressed if all members both receive what they need and share their resources with others.

However, the needs and gifts, challenges and expectations of the worshipping children can only be identified if they themselves are allowed to voice them. And for this to come about, true and ongoing dialogue is needed in the church. Just as the church has learnt to move in the direction of using inclusive or expansive language, and to make better use of ministries and resources of both male and female members,⁵ so it must learn to engage in a dialogue where its youngest members have the opportunity to voice their needs, expectations and concerns. Otherwise worships will continue to be a mere adult event and exclude the voices and gifts, prayers and presence of the little ones. As already noted, without them the worship will be amputated or incomplete, and the children, in turn, will feel excluded. In order to overcome this incompleteness, the dialogue among adults, youth, and children must also be concerned with worship and liturgy.

Children and worship in the ecumenical movement

Churches are increasingly becoming aware of the status of their child members. The British Council of Churches (BCC) published one of the first comprehensive modern statements giving recognition to the status of the

⁵ The way in which the focus on women worshipping in church and the ecumenical decade of women has opened the church's eyes to what women believe, see, feel and otherwise experience is focused on in a recent study by Ninna Edgard Beckman, *Feminism och liturgi – en ekklesiologisk studie* (Doctoral Dissertation), Uppsala: Uppsala University 2001.

children in the church – *The Child in the Church* – in 1976.⁶ It deals with Christian nurture of children in the context of Britain and contains perspicuous analysis as well as a wealth of suggestions of how to meet the churches' needs in this field, especially in regard to its child membership. Their place in and importance for the church is adequately recognized: "Children are a gift to the Church. The Lord of the Church sets them in the midst of the Church today, as in Galilee, not as objects of benevolence, nor even as recipients of instruction, but in the last analysis as patterns of discipleship."⁷

The recommendations in this statement to the BCC member churches include the following three points, which aptly draw the consequences of the church's view of its children members for its worship life:⁸

Christian initiation. We recommend that in the necessary re-examination of their various initiation Ceremonies the Churches should bear in mind that children in the Church are not to be thought of as being in a stage of mere preparation for the Christian life nor as being merely in preparation for adult membership.

Worship: integration. We recommend that since children should be more clearly seen to be part of the worshipping community churches should give careful consideration to times, places and patterns of worship in order to effect the appropriate integration of children and adults.

Worship: participation. We recommend that gathering of the local Church for worship should be modified so that greater opportunity is created for the participation of children in ways appropriate to them and to the liturgy.

The recommendations stress that children in the BCC member churches must be taken seriously as fellow members of the worshipping community in their own right and with their own needs. They further stress the need to facilitate appropriate integration of both children and adults in worship and that this must be done in a way, which is appropriate to the liturgy. The recommendations, however, fail to say anything about the need to develop liturgies that are of such a nature that they accommodate the needs of all ages. In the subsequent liturgical development, however, measures have been taken to do this in several of the twenty churches and bodies that were

⁶ *The Child in the Church*, London: British Council of Churches, 1976.

⁷ *The Child in the Church*, 1976, p 17, § 43.

⁸ *The Child in the Church*, 1976, p 45, §§ 9-11.

represented in the British Council of Churches Consultative Group on Ministry among Children.⁹

Truly, children have their specific needs, which cannot entirely be met in joint worship services of all ages, but the same goes for adults. Hence, special services may, from time to time, be called for. But fundamentally the church's worship services should comprise all ages, providing the entire community of believers with the gifts of God and be events where all may jointly engage in adoration and prayers, singing and sharing. As this fundamental need has gradually been recognized, over the past decades more and more churches plan their worship life as 'all age worships', 'family worships' or 'holistic services' which provide for the needs of the whole of God's family in each place.¹⁰ For instance the Diocese of Worcester of the Church of England, has adopted the following definition of all-age worship:¹¹

It is not –

- An adult service to which children are invited
- A service for children with adults present
- An opportunity for the children to perform

It is –

- An act of worship in which all participants have a role to play relevant to all and in which each person can make a valued contribution to the whole experience.

This definition secures the inclusion in and joint responsibility of all ages for the worship, thereby recognizing the need for all members and their mutual accountability in the act of worship.

Other examples of ecumenical endeavours may also be mentioned. In 1980, in Evian an ecumenical conference was held, jointly sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), on "Children as Active Partners in the Congregation". At the WCC sixth

⁹ Suffice to mention here the following: Francesca Kelly, *Masses with Children* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1983), *More Masses with Children*, (Blackrock: The Columba Press, 1986), and *Fifty Masses with Children* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1992); Michael Foster & Simon Smith, *A New Start in All-Age Worship*, Suffolk: Kevin Mayhew Ltd., 1999.

¹⁰ Examples of such worship and liturgies may be found in Michael Foster & Simon Smith, *A New Start in All-Age Worship*, 1999.

¹¹ http://www.cofe-worcester.org.uk/work_of_the_diocese/wcw_all_age_worship.html (last visited 2004-06-04)

assembly in Vancouver (1983) children from all over the world were not only present at bible studies; a peace and justice event, and an international camp but also in the worship services, even leading some of them.¹² Thus the ecumenical movement has not only placed child discipleship and the active involvement and participation of children in church on its agenda, it has also given concrete examples of how this might adequately be done.

A dialogue inspired by the recognition of the universal rights of the child

The recognition of the universal rights of the child by the United Nations (UN) in its *Declaration* (1959),¹³ its *Convention* (1989),¹⁴ as well as the UN initiated 'International Year of the Child' (1979) have greatly stimulated Christian churches around the world to pay fuller attention, not only to the rights of children, but to their status in the church. Although the UN resolutions are directed to and refer to 'States Parties', the rights of children are not only relevant in political and social life. The Christian church here finds that many of these rights have clear biblical foundations and ought to be promoted widely, not least within the church itself. Especially Principles 1, 2, 6, 9 and 10 in the *Declaration* and several articles in the *Convention* name rights of the child, and considerations which must be shown to the child and its parents, all with bearings on his or her religious and spiritual life. As such they are equally relevant for the child's involvement in various ways in worship and liturgy. When a child is recognized as a person with his or her rights, then the respect for the right to know, to listen and to speak up for himself/herself follows naturally. And, since their human rights have been acknowledged by a world wide community of nations – albeit not by all – it is even more important that Christian churches should recognize the rights of their own children, not only by paying lip service to principles, but by acknowledging these in the practice of church life and teaching.

¹² Ulrich Becker, "Children", *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Nicholas Lossky *et alii* (eds.), Geneva & Grand Rapids: WCC Publications & William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991, (p. 149f) p 150. In spite of such progress, a question remains: Were children engaged in the preparatory work before the meeting as well?

¹³ (UN) *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, proclaimed by United Nations General Assembly resolution 1386 (XIV) of 20 November 1959 (see the web-edition <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/25.htm>, last visited 2004-05-28).

¹⁴ (UN) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989; entry into force 2 September 1990, in accordance with article 49 and has been ratified by 191 countries (see the web-edition <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc/treaties/crc.htm>, last visited 2004-05-28).

The UNICEF publication *A World Fit for Children*, approved by the United Nations Special Session on Children in 2002, contains “Millennium Development Goals”, “Special Session on Children Documents”, and “The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child”.¹⁵ Here the former commitments of the UN are reconfirmed and applied to the present and future world situation. Apart from all other child-related concerns voiced in this document, the right of the child to hold a faith, be part of a religious community and to develop his or her spiritual life should be noted. These issues have already been aptly addressed in various ways in the *Convention* (Art. 13,1; 14,1-3; 15,1; 27,1; 31,1-2) but need constant reminders in church and society. In fact churches are increasingly showing signs of their obligation to the *Convention*, trying to follow it when guidelines for their work among children are made and carried out.¹⁶

A number of networks like UNICEF, such as the Global Movement for Children (GMC)¹⁷ and the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC),¹⁸ work for the recognition of children’s rights and for changes in political and social life, which may improve the lives of children in the world. On its website, UNICEF gives the following self presentation:

We are part of the Global Movement for Children – a broad coalition dedicated to improving the life of every child. Through this movement, and events such as the United Nations Special Session on Children, we encourage young people to speak out and participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

¹⁵ UNICEF, *A World Fit for Children*. Millennium Development Goals, Special Session on Children Documents, The Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF: Geneva 2002 (also in PDF on-line-edition: http://www.unicef.org/publications/pub_wffc_en.pdf, last visted 2004-05-28).

¹⁶ One such example is the policy document of the Church of Sweden for work among children aged 0-14, *I Dialog med Barn – grund för Svenska kyrkans arbete bland barn 0 – 14 år*. Uppsala: Svenska kyrkans församlingsnämnd, 1999, where the last pages contain guidelines for analysing the consequences which the *Convention* has for children’s rights in parishes on various levels (p. 30f).

¹⁷ The Global Movement for Children (GMC) is a worldwide movement of organisations, individuals and children. It unites efforts to build a world fit for children. *‘In solidarity with a broad range of partners, we will lead a global movement for children that creates an unstoppable momentum for change.’* (UNICEF, *A World Fit for Children*, approved by the United Nations Special Session on Children, Geneva 2002)

¹⁸ For minutes of the European Meeting in Lisbon, Portugal, August 7-11, 2002, see http://www.gnrc.ne.jp/square/global_final.html (last visited 2004-05-28).

Hence, when entering into dialogue with children on liturgy and worship the church has rich resources to draw from and to inspire its endeavour.

A Dialogue assisted by international dialogue incentives

One of the most important principles set out in the World Council of Churches *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (first published in 1979 and still in high demand),¹⁹ is no. 4: “Partners in dialogue should be free to ‘define themselves’”. For dialogue involving children this means that the child is not only to engage in the dialogue process by being a learner and listener but to contribute actively as a subject to the dialogue from his or her perspective as well. Taking stock of thirty years of dialogue and revisiting the 1979 *Guidelines*, the WCC Central Committee in 2002 accepted a new document, the *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions*.²⁰ Among other things the *Ecumenical Considerations* spell out and affirm that dialogue must be a process of mutual empowerment, so that the participants through this process may grow in faith, affirm their hopes, nurture relations, be informed by the context and strive toward mutual respect (§§ 18-23). Also, dialogue aims at being a co-operative and collaborative activity where the partners strive to be inclusive. This can only be achieved if all partners together plan the dialogue and set its agenda (§§ 25-26).

As these considerations are highly relevant for any kind of dialogue, they are certainly valid also when the church engages in dialogue with children on worship and liturgy. Children’s potential, as believers and legitimate contributors in the dialogue, must therefore be taken for granted. Through dialogue, both children and adults will be expected to learn and grow in various ways, and its outcome to benefit all ages. As will become evident from the following points, the guidelines that are spelled out in the *Ecumenical Considerations* are likely to inspire and contribute to a successful dialogue process that will enable both children and adults to conduct the dialogue in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

¹⁹ For its full text, see <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/77glines-e.html> (last visited 2004-05-28).

²⁰ For an on-line edition of the document, see <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/glines-e.html> (last visited 2004-05-28).

Keeping this in mind we may now turn to the question of how to develop liturgies and conduct liturgies.

For children, by children, or with children?

Basically there are three approaches or models for conducting and developing liturgies and worship services for children, or for children, youth and adults together, so-called 'all age worship'. In the first model (*for children*), adults (and perhaps youth) are engaged in preparing worship or conducting liturgies for children or for children and other age groups.

Examples of this model are the *Masses with Children*, *More Masses with Children* and *Fifty Masses With Children* designed by Sister Francesca Kelly.²¹ In spite of the programmatic titles no credit has been given to any child involvement whatsoever in developing these liturgies.²²

Throughout the history of the Christian church, adults, especially ministers and theologians, have developed most liturgies. Although the church may have facilitated lay participation and active involvement of various ministries

²¹ Francesca Kelly, *Masses with Children*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1983; *Fifty Masses with Children*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1983; *More Masses with Children*, Blackrock: The Columba Press, 1992; cf. also by same author *50 Children's Liturgies for all Occasions*. Twenty-third Publications: Mystic, Conn., 1992.

²² Thus, either their participation is ignored, which in itself would be discriminatory, or children have not been active in the process of developing the masses at all, which is more likely. The titles actually ought to read: '*Masses Prepared by Adult(s) for the Use of Adults Together With Children*'.

of the church (such as bishops, priests, deacons, cantors),²³ attempts to draw on children's resources are either very marginal or non-existent.²⁴ There are many reasons for this, but I will especially mention three:

- In most churches the development of liturgies as well as conducting liturgical worship and parts thereof have by and large been dominated by the professionals (i.e., theologians, priests and other liturgical ministries).
- Most churches throughout the world are characterized by having a hierarchical power structure where children have no say.²⁵
- It was only in the latter half of the twentieth century that focus on children's rights and involvement have been placed on the agenda. Although the church has long been aware of children's spiritual needs their active involvement in developing liturgies and celebrating worship is still lagging heavily behind.

²³ Thus, both in the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway various lay and ordained ministries were involved in the processes of revising and developing new church hymnals and liturgies in the twentieth century, but no children were actively involved. See Helge Fæhn, *Høymessen i går og i dag*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2nd edition, 1968; *Gudstjenestelivet i Den norske kirke – fra reformasjonen til våre dager*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1994 (especially p. 357f); Liturgikommisjonen av 1965 (ed.), *Ny ordning for høymessen* (Norges Offentlige Utredninger, Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet, NOU 1976:5), Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976; Liturgikommisjonen av 1965 (ed.), *Norsk Salmebok. Forslag til felles salmebok for Den norske kirke*. (Norges Offentlige Utredninger, Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet, NOU 1981:40:5), Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1981; 1968 års kyrkohandboks-kommitté, *Svenska kyrkans gudstjänst, Band 1: Huvudgudstjänster och övriga gudstjänster*. (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, Kommundepartementet, SOU 1974:66), Stockholm: Libris Förlag 1974; *Den Svenska Psalmboken, Vol 2: Historik, principer, motiveringar*. Slutbetänkande av 1969 års Psalmskommitté, (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, Kommundepartementet, SOU 1985:16), Stockholm: Liber Allmänna Förlaget, 1985).

²⁴ In spite of the otherwise valuable and many-faceted contribution to thematize child participation in liturgy, none of the authors in the following publication have discussed possible children involvement in developing liturgies: Virgil C. Funk (Ed.), *Children, Liturgy and Music* (Pastoral Music in Practice, 2), Washington D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1990.

²⁵ The way in which feminist theology and the ecumenical decade of women has changed the attitudes in church and liturgy has been demonstrated by Nina Edgardh Beckman, *Feminism och teologi – en ecklesiologisk studie* (Doctoral Dissertation, Faculty of Theology), Uppsala: Uppsala University 2001.

The other model (*by* children) and the third model (*with* children) both reflect an attitude of considering children as equal partners in worship. Whereas model two (*by* children) tends to isolate children and children's worship from the rest of the community's worship life, the third model (*with* children) reflects an approach whereby children are considered equal partners with youth and adults in worship. In the following we shall identify further the positive and negative consequences of the three models or approaches.

For children

In this model the faith, hopes and experience of children are seen and heard only as interpreted by adults and will only reflect their own childhood experience or experience from work with children. The *positive* consequences of this approach to dialogue are as follows:

- Since childhood is universal, and all adults (and youth) have been children, they may be able to voice children's views, needs and experience as they now remember it from their own childhood.
- The liturgies are not private, but belong to the people of God as community, to his church throughout the ages and in every place. Adults may represent some of this common heritage in their work on liturgies for children or the so-called all-age-worship services.
- As adults normally have a higher cognitive insight and experience than children, and are more familiar with the fundamental documents of the Christian church – Scripture and creeds - and the church's history and theological development, they will represent a more comprehensive perception than children are able to. Yet adults can only represent the other adults of the church, even though they may well speak up for the children of the church also.
- Adults may recall and remember well their own joys and grief, fears and hopes as children. The problems and challenges faced by contemporary children will, however, often vary extensively from those that adults of today had in their own childhood. Through mass media children are today constantly confronted in their homes and local environment with ongoing wars, violence and oppression, poverty and suffering of other people in

the world, especially other children. Also the rate of divorce and broken families has drastically increased in the West in the last decennia, representing a threat to children whether or not their own families are involved. In spite of the fact that adults equally will face and know of these facts, and to some extent understand how children feel threatened, only children themselves are able to convey the kind and degree of existential fear and hopelessness they may harbour.²⁶

- In order to create awareness in churches and parishes of the necessity for opening up for child participation in worship and preparation of worship and liturgies, this approach may have its advantage, but only to remove some of the barriers for full involvement. As soon as a church or a parish recognizes the necessity of child participation, it follows as the next natural step to include them in the workshops on liturgy and worship as well.

The *negative* consequences of this approach to dialogue are that:

- Children are substituted by adults who cannot truly represent contemporary childhood or the experience and viewpoints of children today.
- In spite of all that may indeed appeal to children in liturgies and individual worship services, through the way they are celebrated and by the rooms or places in which they are celebrated, or by the pictures and other

²⁶ The dialogue between children and the journalist Simon Flem Devold in the column "På skråss" in the Saturday editions of the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* which has been going on for more than 20 years is a good example of a contemporary, true dialogue between adult and child. Here one finds letters or extracts from letters by children and teen-agers to which Devold responds. The writers freely voice their opinions, questions, problems, frustrations and joys in life and receive direct and candid answers. Some children write many letters, others only one or a few. The correspondence reveals an atmosphere of genuine, mutual trust and respect which Devold has managed to establish through his concrete and humble, humoristic and honest approach to dialogue. Throughout his correspondence he remains the adult dialogue partner and avoids becoming childish. At the same time he shows the ability to meet children and youth where they are in life and to admit of his own uncertainty or ignorance when he is unable to give fully satisfactory answers. Some times he will refer to other dialogue partners or even challenge other children to come forward with their opinions. The many existential questions, which have been brought forward in the columns, have resulted in a number of publications, such as *Bare jeg i hele verden: barn og tenåringer skriver om sitt liv*. Oslo: Cappelen, 1992; "*Hvem skapte Gud?*": *barn og tenåringer forteller om sin tro*. [Oslo]: Verbum, 2001.

aesthetic expressions that may be found there; most liturgies have been developed by adults. It is their faith, views and needs that dominate most of the liturgies of the church and the language in which they are phrased. Even liturgies designed for the use with and by children are more often than not created by adults, albeit that many of the entrepreneurs are gifted leaders in child ministries or other adults who are devoted to child ministries and live close to children's daily lives.

- Whenever adopted as praxis in church, this approach is in dire contradiction to a sacramental theology that recognizes baptised children as Christians. They are persons who have received the Holy Spirit, have been reborn, and become children of God and members of his church. Only an approach that includes the children can be theologically accountable as an orthodox expression of the church's sacramental theology.
- When an adult meets or speaks instead of a child he/she will always remain a substitute, never a true representative, since only the child can speak for himself or herself. Everything less than the living voice of the child falls short of being authentic.
- Dialogue with children is non-existent in this model. Adults suppose they take into consideration the joys and sorrows, needs and opinions of children but will only be able to do so to a certain extent. The future life of the child and his/her need to develop and grow in Christian faith - may to some extent be accounted for by adults' schemes (the didactic aspect), but only the child can tell of his or her faith of today and hopes for tomorrow (the existential aspect).

By children

In this second model or approach to dialogue the faith, hopes and experience of children are seen and heard. The *positive* consequences of this approach to dialogue are as follows:

- Children are given a chance to participate in their own right and to contribute with their gifts.

- Children's voices are heard, their bodies seen and their opinions registered.
- Children get to voice that which only children are able to see, feel and experience in faith.
- Children get experience from developing liturgies, preparing for and celebrating Christian worship services.
- Participation will also enable children to develop expressions for their faith and life, which truly correspond with their life situation, or in other words, which are congenial with their status and contextually rooted in their life situation.

The *negative* consequences of this approach to dialogue are as follows:

- The same weakness as in the first model, i.e. that of isolating one group of believers in the church, only that children here replace the adults.
- Since children alone cannot authentically represent the entire family of God there is also a fundamental weakness with this approach, as youth and adults are left out.
- The adults and youth are excluded, and only the children's stages of humanhood – that is childhood – are represented.
- The common faith and heritage of the church, which belongs to all Christians, not only to children, cannot be fully represented by children alone.

With children

This approach presupposes togetherness of children and adults, mutual sharing and accountability in the process of developing and celebrating worship and liturgies. First of all a note about the process in this model of dialogue: *With children* does not necessarily imply a balanced cooperation of children and adults, let alone that children are/were the main initiators or creative force in developing the dialogue. If dialogue *with* children is

not to be a mere showcase, therefore, child representation must be substantial enough to make them feel truly respected and have a real impact on the dialogue process and its outcome.

The *positive* consequences of this approach to dialogue are that:

- When adults (and youth) engage in dialogue with children, together they represent the whole church in any place, informed by their particular context.²⁷
- This approach to dialogue is congenial with the confession of the people of God as belonging to one catholic church, and to the fact that the liturgy belongs to all Christians. It respects the equal dignity of all Christians in the church – adults and children alike – in spite of their different gifts, roles, tasks and contributions.
- Whether the dialogue is aimed at regular liturgies and all-age-worship, or at liturgies particularly aimed at children's needs, it is a true and representative expression of the entire family of God on earth.
- When children, youth as well as adults are able to express their faith and doubts, their expectations and hopes, suffering and disappointments, shortcomings and joys, lament and praise, the partners in dialogue become both contributors and receivers.
- Through joint efforts adults, youth and children may be able to achieve common goals for the benefit of the whole church engaged in worship and liturgy.

Are there any *negative* consequences of this approach to dialogue? In this third approach there can only be two real dangers. The first danger is to pay more attention to the needs of the child than to the needs of other age groups or to the worship itself. This, however, is an even greater danger in the former model (i.e., *by* children). In a dialogue with children where other age groups are represented these may speak up for their own needs and concerns as well as paying attention to what children themselves voice. Thus, when children, youth and adults meet together for dialogue the chance

²⁷ Compare the 2002 *Ecumenical Considerations*, guideline no. 22.

is much higher that the needs of the child are met with the same respect as that of adults and youth than if adults (first model) or children (second model) dialogue separately.

The second danger is that the dialogue partners pay more attention to their own needs and particular context than to the worship itself so the wider, contemporary and ecumenical aspects of the worship are lost, or that insufficient attention is paid to worship and liturgical traditions handed down in the Christian church through the centuries. This, however is a possibility in all liturgical work and not restricted to this third approach to dialogue. Respect must be paid both to the child (the youth and the adult) and the worship itself.

Therefore, in order that the outcome of dialogue should not result in a perverted worship, or in isolating the liturgy from the worship and liturgies in the church everywhere and through all ages, the dialogue partners must always keep in mind their ecumenical responsibility.

Following this assessment of the three models or approaches to dialogue one may conclude that only the third approach is viable for a church which takes seriously its membership of all ages. The first approach means leaving the children out, whereas the second leaves out the adults (or youth) and isolates children from the rest of the church community. Only the third approach pays full attention to the oneness of the church in spite of age differences. If, in Christ, "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female..." (Gal 3,28; NEB) but all are one, then, qualitatively speaking, the difference between adult, youth and child also does not exist – all are heirs to the kingdom in their union with Christ (Gal 3,27). Thus only a dialogue on liturgy and worship which is conducted together with children can be accepted as legitimate and a true expression of the entire church. This also has another consequence, namely that worship liturgies cannot be developed in isolation from the people of God at large, neither children nor youth nor adults, if they are to genuinely and adequately represent the pattern for and instances of worship in the church in any place.

Hence, setting up commissions consisting only of adults to revise existing liturgies or develop new ones cannot continue to be the way to administer such work if it is to be a liturgy which is both authentic and representative for

the whole church. Ways must be found to include children as well as other lay people in the process. They must in a natural way be drawn into the work from its beginning and not only function as ‘hearing groups’ when initial drafts have been prepared or liturgies have reached their final stages, more or less completed. Failing to do so will perpetuate the system of excluding the children and silencing their voices. Instead one must seek means of integrating children in the different stages of the process. Only thus can the faith experience of children, their frustrations and hopes, lament and praise, joy and playfulness be drawn naturally into the worship and liturgies themselves. This requires ingenuity and special methods but is far from impossible. Experience from liturgical workshops together with children confirms the feasibility of such an approach. In the following, some guidelines for dialogue *with* children on worship and liturgy will be outlined.

Before listing these guidelines an important note should be added. Evidently dialogue on worship and liturgy that is conducted together with children must keep in mind both of the dimensions found in the New Testament (see 2.1 above):

- Baptized children have a status in the worshipping community, which is fundamentally equal with that of adults.
- One must recognize the need of both children and adults to be nurtured in faith and continuous growth in faith and expressions of faith.

Without respecting these dimensions as presuppositions for Christian worship the liturgy will degenerate and lose its theological accountability.

Toward a methodology for dialogue with children on worship and liturgy

Although children, youth and adults should meet equal respect and enjoy equal rights in dialogue groups on worship and liturgy, youth and adults have a special responsibility for creating a good dialogue atmosphere and to ensure that common rules are followed. This concern is voiced also in the following twelve guidelines for clarifying roles of adults and children in dialogue on worship and liturgy. The list is not meant to be complete. Also, the guidelines

are not prepared exclusively for dialogue on worship and liturgy but may be found to be sound also in other areas of dialogue with children:

1. The dialogue situation should seek to create an atmosphere of mutual confidence, trust and cooperation, thus securing a good balance between the dialogue partners. Toward this goal all partners must contribute. Participating adults, however, have a special responsibility for securing and enhancing such an atmosphere.²⁸
2. In view of their status and experience, adults and youth have a responsibility for leading the dialogue, for pointing out various alternatives and options, for inviting questions, registering answers and viewpoints, and for summing up and recording the findings in such a way that all participants may feel respected and will be able to recognize the conclusions as fully representative.
3. When opinions differ, this should be recorded, since dialogue does not necessarily imply agreement in all or most matters. Dialogue, however, is more often than not a process through which participants are led to greater mutual understanding and a higher degree of consensus and recognition of the results than if children or adults unilaterally engage in such work. By joint efforts in dialogue, participants may not only come to recognize each other in the process but are also likely to respect and identify with the results coming out of the dialogue sessions.
4. The participating adult (and youth) must be conscious of his or her role in the dialogue process and avoid the danger of becoming dominating, manipulating and power abusing. If not, he or she will violate the presupposition of equality and mutual accountability in the dialogue situation.
5. The adult (and youth) must also be aware that he or she may possibly have a longer or perhaps even a more profound faith experience than the child, but that the faith which a child holds is, qualitatively speaking, equally a Christian faith.

²⁸ Cf. The second principle in the 1979 *Guidelines on Dialogue* ("Dialogue should normally be planned together") and guiding principles nos. 23 and 25-26 in the 2002 *Ecumenical Considerations* which stress the need for mutual respect in dialogue, and dialogue as a co-operative and collaborative activity which must be inclusive.

6. The adults must further be aware that they contribute to the dialogue as grown-ups and not try to pretend that they are children or behave in a child-like way. Otherwise they will fail to fulfil their duty as adults and lose respect among the other participants, especially among participating children.
7. The adults must moreover not misuse the trust of children in the dialogue situation by relating to others such matters which children may have uttered in confidence and which are not meant to be shared with persons outside the dialogue situation itself.²⁹
8. The child must feel encouraged to freely express his or her opinions, experience and expectations, without being ridiculed or ignored.
9. Ways must be sought to enable the child to come forward with his and her points of view, questions and expectations in a way, which is congruent to his or her status as a child.
10. As the child is both an autonomous individual and dependent on his or her family, the dialogue and cooperation with children should be conducted in such a way that both autonomy and dependency are recognized. A good communication between church and family must be upheld in cases where children are involved in children's work and in workshops on worship and liturgy so that neither the rights of parents or children are violated.
11. On the one hand the child must feel respected as accountable, and therefore responsible; on the other the dialogue group must make allowance for such deviations (e.g., from appointments), which are caused by priorities made on behalf of the child by its parents. If, however, good and sufficient communication between church and homes is maintained, one normally finds that children as partners are loyal to common decisions or commitments and will keep and respect appointments.³⁰

²⁹ An exception here is, of course, when and if children share incidents of indecent sexual assault, oppression and other forms of abuse which they have experienced themselves and where the adult has an obligation to follow up by reporting to relevant medical or legal authorities.

³⁰ Experience shows that it is normally the lack of dialogue between children and their own parents rather than lacking communication between church, children and their homes, which causes children to be absent from or come too late for, appointed events. Close contact between church and homes and concrete appointments may therefore enhance the daily dialogue between children and parents and the parents' esteem for their own children's resources and abilities as Christians.

12. Dialogue must respect the balance between the social, emotional and intellectual development of children and the acceptance of their status as fully human in every stage of their lives.³¹

What can be expected from a dialogue with children on worship and liturgy?

Dialogue is a process where discoveries on the way often are as important as its final conclusions. Thus, if one envisages a constant dialogue in church and parishes on worship and liturgy one is likely to have new insights all the time. The outcome of dialogues with children on worship and liturgy is also unpredictable, and the only way to know the results is through engaging in dialogue itself. There are, nevertheless some indications of how children will contribute to such dialogue and what they will bring into it. These are consequences of the general characteristics or qualities, which pertain to childhood. Thomas B. Shephard has named four pairs of such characteristics or qualities of childhood, namely openness and innocence, imagination and creativity, playfulness and leisure, sensuality and sacramentality.³² One may think of other characteristics as well, but at least one more should be added here, namely relations and dependence. We shall briefly look at how these may influence the dialogue.

The fact that childhood is characterized by *relations and dependence* makes children concerned with the church as a family and with the relationship between their own families and the church as an extended family. Children will therefore expect worship in the church to express a true community spirit. They enjoy adult contact as well as fellowship with other children. Child worship alone will not satisfy their expectations or needs.

³¹ Cf. *The Child in the Church*, 1976, p. 7-9. Virgil C. Funk has drawn attention to what he calls 'an important principle of pastoral practitioners' which may stand as a principle securing the right balance in all children's work: "... childhood is a state unto itself and it is of its very nature a transition to another state. Part of our effort to help the child is made by adapting to the state that exists, and part of our effort must be to call the child to a new stage of development." (Virgil C. Funk, "Blessed Be Jesus Whom You Sent to Be the Friend of Children" in Virgil C. Funk (Ed.), *Children, Liturgy and Music* (Pastoral Music in Practice, 2), The Pastoral Press, Washington D.C., 1990, (p. 35-42) p. 37)

³² Thomas B. Shephard, "What does it mean to be a Child?" in: Virgil C. Funk (ed.), *Children, Liturgy and Music* (Pastoral Music in Practice, 2), The Pastoral Press, Washington D.C., 1990, p 71-77) p 73-75.

If fellowship is only nominal or superficial, children will easily sense this. If a child finds no connections between church worship and his or her family, or natural links to life in the family, he or she will easily lose interest if they find worship irrelevant in this regard. On the other hand children will easily think of and make concrete suggestions of prayer items concerning their family situation, the lonely, the marginalized and suffering people.

If immigrants and children from deprived backgrounds are partners in the dialogue, or persons with physical or psychic malfunctions, children will normally identify themselves with these and be open to meeting their needs. Children may therefore be expected to bring such qualities to the dialogue on worship and liturgy which enhance the relational aspects of worship, makes it a genuine community event and truly contextual.

Children will normally enter into dialogue with *openness and innocence*. If in the group they experience lack of respect for their points of view and suggestions or are otherwise hurt, they will withdraw or become passive. If they feel respected, their openness and innocence will make them both courageous and receptive to the ideas and viewpoints of other dialogue partners. This, of course will pertain to youth and adult partners in dialogue as well. When adult dialogue partners are reluctant to try out new forms of worship, or reform existing patterns of worship because “we have tried this before and it didn’t work” or because “we have not tried this before and it may not work”, children in a dialogue group will tend to be more open-minded to fresh starts and new ideas and be willing to try them out. With their openness and innocence children are therefore likely to bring the aspect of renewal and innovation into dialogue.

The latter element is closely linked with children’s *imagination and creativity*. When the Psalmist calls the people of God to “Sing a new song to the Lord” (Ps 96,1; 98,1; cf Ps 33,3; 40,4) his invitation is likely to be followed by the children. Their imagination and creativity are a great resource for the group when it tries to find adequate ways of child and other lay participation in liturgy. When asked, children will often think of concrete ways of expressing joy and sorrow, thanksgiving and praise, community and ritual.³³ They will

³³ Cf. the principles of adaptation suggested by Elizabeth McMahon Jeep in her article “Liturgy with Children: Basic Liturgical Principles” in Virgil C. Funk (Ed.), *Children, Liturgy and Music* (Pastoral Music in Practice, 2), Washington D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1990, (p. 43-51) p. 48-50.

not limit themselves to the verbal part of liturgy but suggest the use of non-verbal expressions, such as flowers and fruits, paintings and pictures, music, gestures and other aesthetic elements. This has to do with children's appreciation for symbols – including the visible, audible, tangible, edible and the fragrant.³⁴ They will normally think of liturgy and worship in terms of activity, of doing something together, engaging the entire person and all ages. Thus they will often think of how they or other children may be active partners in the liturgy and think of ways in which they may be involved. The imagination and creativity of children are therefore likely to enhance the holistic, concrete and imaginative aspects of worship and liturgy.

Childhood is characterized by *playfulness and leisure*. Children are apt to love liturgical dance, processions and other movements or gestures in the liturgical room and will normally wish to be part of it. As children are used to playing they will quickly discern whether worship, as a celebration of the victory of the risen Christ and the hope he has brought, is genuine. Although liturgy always has a didactic function it cannot be reduced to education lest it lose its true sense of worship. It must remain celebration.³⁵ Children's awareness of the joy and excitement of celebration is therefore of great importance as a resource in dialogue on worship and liturgy.

Another quality of childhood is its *sensuality and sacramentality*. Children have a gift for discerning the various moods in worship as well as sensing the genuineness and quality of what goes on. They are fast learners and easily adapt to rituals and symbols. They combine a desire for predictability with openness to what is new. Therefore they like to use the rituals, symbols and songs they know but also crave engaging in and learning the new. One may therefore find them very keen to be included in various ways in the celebration of the sacraments, in processions, as ministrants and as bell-ringers. They will welcome being part of the distributing of hymnals, bibles and orders of worship and will joyfully participate in tableaux, bible-pantomime or the actualising of biblical texts through sketches, plays or dance. In the dialogue group, children will therefore be able to identify parts, which they may have in the worship and open the congregation's scope for new ways of involving them.

³⁴ Thomas B. Shephard, "What does it mean to be a child?", 1990, p. 73-75.

³⁵ McMahan Jeep, "Liturgy with children", 1990, p. 48-50.

Seeing how children through these and other qualities may enrich dialogue work on worship and liturgy we may conclude that their participation will not only be valuable but also needed if the worship life of the church is to maintain its representativity of the whole church, its vividness and contextuality, creativity and fellowship functions. But only by engaging in dialogue itself will churches and congregations fully fathom the gift of the children to their worship life.

Conclusion

Through evidence from Scripture, the church's understanding of baptism and the ecumenical creeds I have argued that the church recognizes baptized children as Christians, and hence as full members of the church – equal to youth and adults. In this capacity they cannot be treated as mere objects but must be considered as contributors in the life of the church. This means that children are also equal partners both in the celebration of the church's worship and in developing its liturgies. Without them Christian worship will suffer, since the church, as the adults and youth, need the children as much as they need them. Without children as partners and contributors, the church's worship will not be theologically legitimate and will also lose its relevance. If partnership is to function adequately, children must be engaged by the church through dialogue on worship and liturgy together with youth and adults.

Twelve guidelines for such dialogue have been proposed, albeit these are not in any way to be understood as exhaustive or complete. The guidelines are based on ecumenical dialogue experience and on the insights from international work with children's rights. The guidelines aim at securing a good and fruitful atmosphere for such dialogue. When churches engage in local dialogues, new insights are certain to follow which may supplement the twelve listed above. I have also briefly outlined the expected outcome of dialogue with children on worship and liturgy, basing my predictions on five pairs of general characteristics or qualities of childhood. Only by trying the dialogue itself will the church and its local parishes discover the rich treasure which dwells in its children. Although the church needs a theological motivation for engaging in this kind of dialogue, it can equally draw inspiration from ecumenical incentives and the international human rights of children. Fortunately churches have already embarked on this new way. Hopefully this contribution will encourage churches both on national and

local levels to do so even more. Such dialogue will certainly enrich and renew the church's worship, as well as make it more holistic and secure in its theological accountability.