

Theological Rationale for the Children's Offertory

When my kids were small, we spent a lot of time at the Ontario Science Centre. They loved the children's area and even the adult areas too. Mostly because they were allowed to touch everything. The exhibits were designed for the public to learn by touching, manipulating, trying, and doing. Funny enough, this greatly influenced my understanding of how kids should participate in the liturgy and in learning about God. If kids can be trusted to learn about rich and complex scientific principles in an experiential way, then surely they can also learn about God and prayer and theology and liturgy in a similar way.

It has long been a practice in the Anglican Church for the presiding priest to include others at the altar. Whether lay or ordained, there is a role for other people when it comes to setting the table for the community meal. Deacons make explicit vows to assist the priest in the public administration of the sacraments and that is commonly expressed as the deacon preparing the table. But in many cases, there's a role for others too, whether that be a sub-deacon, a lay-reader, altar servers, and so on. We trust lay people to set the table and bring forward the elements of bread and wine. Why not trust and equip children to do the same?

Children can do most things in our liturgies and they can do them well when we set them up for success. As such, we designed the Children's Offertory in a way that gives children a meaningful and serious role, and yet is shaped to set them up for success. When Doug composed the lyrics and the music for the offertory song, we modelled the text on something I had seen done in classrooms. Nursery school and kindergarten classrooms routinely employed some kind of "tidy up song" or "get ready song" by picking a familiar tune and customizing the words of the lyrics to be the tasks that need doing. So a tidy up song might have an instruction about putting toys in their bins in verse one, shelving books in verse two, and so on. We shaped our song so that each verse of the offertory song is one step in setting up the altar for the Eucharist.

This brought with it many spill-over effects. First, it dramatically reduced the time needed for rehearsals. Because the "stage directions" are in the lyrics, the kids get embedded reminders on what comes next. This also means there is less adult prompting during the event. Second, it became a teaching tool for the congregation broadly. So many adults experienced it and offered the feedback that they never knew what really happened during the preparation of the gifts. They were used to having their heads buried in a book while singing an offertory hymn and leaving the task to sacramental ministers. This music was simple enough that it got their heads up and they learned the steps alongside the children. It also empowered the children to be teachers and leaders of the congregation. Children could be trusted to touch real vessels, serve in a needed role, and model our liturgy for the adult congregation.