

‘HEARING VOICES’

encouraging children to take a full part in church life

Four sessions were held in June and October 2010 to discuss the contents of this paper. Comments made by participants in those sessions are shown in italics.

INTRODUCTION

Whose Church is it anyway?

The preamble to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* clearly places the rights of children in the context of all human rights, which are accorded to individuals on the basis of their membership of the human family. The Church should not be behind the world in this recognition. And in addition, through Baptism, the Church very clearly recognises an extra family membership – membership of the body of Christ. Caroline Fairless in her book *Children at Worship: Congregations in Bloom*¹ asks, ‘What happens when we dare assume that children have an identical claim on the space, ritual, style and content of worship as do adults?’ The first item in the United Reformed Church’s *Charter for Children in the Church*² reads, ‘Children are equal partners with adults in the life of the church.’

- What would be the implications of taking such views seriously? What challenges and what benefits would they offer?

¹ Fairless, C. S. (2000). *Children at Worship: Congregations in Bloom* New York (USA): Church Publishing Inc.

² United Reformed Church. (2004). *Charter for Children in the Church*. London: United Reformed Church

What is equal? A discussion needs to be had about what we mean by the term in our church context, and to what extent people can be equal. Lack of understanding of issues and lack of life experience all reduce equality.

Who do you want to be?

Participation is all about the relationships between people and the roles they adopt in relation to each other. There is an interesting chart on p193 of the chapter participants are asked to read in the first activity of the Open University module on participation (see ‘resources’ at the end of the handout). It has been adapted by Kirby and Gibbs³ and shows eight roles that adults can take in relation to children’s activities, going from the non-directive ‘Abstainer’ (‘I’ll let you get on and do it yourself’) at the top, to the directive ‘doer’ (‘I’ll do it for you’) at the bottom. The list is as follows:

Abstainer	(leaves children alone to undertake activities)
Observer	(reflects and feeds back on what children are doing)
Enabler	(asks question to find out children's intentions; provides resources)
Activator	(challenges children's ideas to help them develop plans further)
Adviser	(makes suggestions to help make progress)
Informer	(provides information – maybe including adult views)
Instructor	(tells children what to do and how to do it)
Doer	(acts on behalf of children)

Children's hierarchy: *the tendency to form a hierarchy applies to children as well as adults. It is important to make sure older children don't assume a hierarchical relationship towards the younger ones.*

Theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore laments the way that modern children in the West are overprotected and denied the right to make mistakes and learn. In her book *Let The Children Come*⁴ she sees the appropriate transfer of rights and responsibilities to children as they grow as an essential responsibility involved in caring for them.

- What factors effect the position adults take in relation to children on the 'Abstainer' > 'Doer' scale?

³ Kirby, P. and Gibbs, S. (2006) 'Facilitating participation: adults' caring support roles within child-to-child projects in schools and after-school settings', *Children & Society*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 209-222

⁴ Miller-McLemore, B. J. (2003). *Let The Children Come: Reimagining childhood from a Christian perspective*. San Francisco (USA): Jossey-Bass.

Imposed responsibility: *it is important that involvement in parish decision making doesn't become a burden to children and that it doesn't make being part of the church too 'serious' a matter.*

A chance to fail *is important for development. Children should have the confidence to know that they can try and fail but still be loved and valuable.*

SHARING EXPERIENCES

Levels of participation

There are degrees to which children participate in activities, from the highest, in which children have the ideas and adults join in at their invitation, to the lowest, at which children take part in something but they do what the adults have already decided they will do. R. Hart produced a 'ladder' of participation with eight 'rungs'⁵. You can find it on p167 of the chapter in the Open University module on participation.

Hart sees the top five rungs as showing increasing levels of participation, while the bottom three are not really participation at all. The rungs are:

- 8 Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults (adults invited to share)
- 7 Child-initiated and directed (adults available to share)
- 6 Adult initiated, shared decisions with children
- 5 Children consulted and informed
- 4 Children are assigned but informed

- 3 Tokenism – little choice as to how they express views, or what on
- 2 Decoration – taking part without understanding
- 1 Manipulation – doing what the adults have decided

- What examples of children's involvement in Church activities have you experienced? Where would you place them on Hart's 'ladder'? How could they be moved further up?

⁵ Hart, R. (1992) 'Participation from tokenism to citizenship', in *Innocenti Essays*, no 4, Florence: UNICEF

Our Church

- What decisions have been made in your church in the last year?
- Who made them and how?
- Were children involved? Could they have been? If so, how?

Timescale: *A year is a very long time to a 5 year old. If children are involved in a planning a project that is then going to take a long time to complete it is important to give them regular updates on progress, visit the site, view photographs etc to maintain a sense of engagement.*

THE PRACTICALITIES

Getting heard

Adults are often very limited in the approach they take to the decision-making process – and if we expect children to do things the same way, we may well draw a blank. Here are some approaches that could enable children to explore and express their views, and contribute to decision-making processes. They might also re-invigorate adult participation.

(Many of these ideas for participation and voting are taken from *Never Too Young* (Miller, 2003)).

- discussion
- ranking exercises (diamond, pyramid, or ladder formats, using packs of cards, with pictures or words)
- 'Circle Time'
- mind maps
- questionnaires
- interviews
- graffiti walls
- 'Leaves of Life' (*Children's Society* resource)
- visual art
- use of pictures or photos
- drama/ role play/ puppets
- telling or creating stories
- model making
- games
- music and movement

Graffiti walls in public places enable the whole congregation to read, note and be inspired by young people's comments.

Ring the changes don't overdo one particular approach or it may lose its impact and appeal.

Activity day: one way of gathering children's views might be to hold an activity day with fun workshops to explore issues.

Voting

Sometimes a straightforward show of hands can leave a child vulnerable to peer pressure, or be too 'cut and dried'. Here are some other ways of 'voting':

- **Beans in a jar:** a jar is provided for each option, and every child is provided with a set number of beans. They can put as many beans as they like in each jar, to show the strength of their support for the options, until their supply runs out. For example if there were three options, and each child had 6 beans, a child might put 4 beans in jar X, 2 in jar Y and none in jar Z.
- **Dot vote:** the same as 'beans in a jar' except that the options are displayed visually, the children receive a number of sticky dots, and they stick the dots on the options they favour.
- **Code dots:** provide children with sticky dots in different colours – each colour representing a different opinion. For example, a group might be asked to draw a map of their neighbourhood and place green dots on the things they liked, red dots on the things they didn't like, and yellow dots on the things wanted to change.
- **Dots, columns and post-its:** divide a large sheet of paper into 3 columns; in the middle column the children write issues they are concerned about; in the right column ask the children to vote for the issues they most want to get involved with by putting dots next to them; identify the top three or four issues; in the left hand column, next to these top choices, ask children to place post-its on which they have written possible actions to be taken.
- **Traffic lights:** use red, orange and green to indicate levels of approval for options under consideration, rather than asking for a straight yes/no. You could use coloured dots, coloured cards to be held up, coloured beads to be put in jars, or coloured corners the children could go to.
- **The human scale:** designate one end of a room as 'definite yes' the other end as 'definite no' and the middle of the room as 'not sure' then ask the children to make a line across the room, choosing their position in the line as an indication of their strength of feeling on an issue.

Ball-pool voting: a variant on the bean jar – have large containers for each option and the children throw ball-pool balls into them to vote.

Complex games: there is a danger that decision making games and activities become too complex and so defeat the object of making the decision making process accessible.

Is voting necessary? The Quakers don't do it. Under the guidance of the Spirit, they wait for a 'sense of the meeting' and a way forward to emerge. This requires gifts of discernment.

Children at formal meetings

Surely children couldn't input to a PCC or other formal committee meeting! *Participation Works* have produced a resource – *Children and young people's involvement in formal meetings: a practical guide* – that shows how this could be facilitated. The following are some of the ideas it contains:

- **Red flag/card:** each young participant is issued with a red flag or card which they show whenever someone at the meeting uses jargon they don't understand. (This might well prove popular with committee members of all ages!)
- **Buddy/mentor:** an adult or adults could be appointed (following CP checks) to accompany children and young people to formal meetings, sit with them and encourage them.
- **Pre-meetings:** the buddy/mentor(s) could meet with young participants in advance of the committee to go through the agenda and highlight the key issues.
- **Chairperson:** the selection of the chairperson, and their conduct of the meeting are crucial to the successful participation of young people.
- **Post-meeting contact:** children and young people should be contacted soon after the meeting to ask if any other ideas have occurred to them.
- **Venue and time:** the meeting has to take place at a time and place that does not make children and young people's attendance problematic.
- **Paperwork:** this should be presented and expressed in clear and accessible ways. (Again, all ages would appreciate this!)

Shadow PCC: a body on which the children serve. They cover exactly the same agenda as the adult PCC and the minutes of their meeting is a substantive item on the agendas of the adult PCC. There could also be a children's AGM to feed in to the adult version. The experience of serving on the 'shadow PCC' helps build confidence for later involvement in the adult PCC. Papers for the adult PCC must be produced on time for consideration by the 'shadow PCC'.

Legalities: there are legal stipulations about membership of the PCC. However, young people can be present at and contribute to a PCC even if they do not have voting rights as members.

Adult vocabulary is a problem, not just jargon. One participant had experience of using the 'red flag' approach and the adults had found it very hard to use vocabulary that was meaningful to the children.

Mission focus: a mission focussed, outward looking PCC agenda might be a way to excite young people and motivate them to be involved.

POST-SCRIPT

- If you involve children in the decision making process, you might think it went well, but did they? How can you evaluate the outcome? The process? And how can children be involved in the evaluation?
- Was the children's participation an 'exercise' or was it 'for real' about something that mattered? Was there an observable result?
- Was the participation a 'one-off' or will the involvement of children in decision making become part of the fabric of your church life?

Resources

Leaves of Life – free **Children's Society** resource, to help make children's voices heard in church and the community

http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/all_about_us/who_we_are/our_church_partnership/leaves_of_life/Leaves_of_Life_4646.html

Free access **Open University** module on children's participation:

<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=3861>

Downloadable from the **Office of the Children's Commissioner**: *Children's Participation in Decision Making: A children's views report*

http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_411

A toolkit on evaluating participation is available from **Participation Works**. Visit the Gateway at <http://www.participationworks.org.uk>. to order it – this resource is one you have to pay for! There are also several free downloads from this site, including *Children and young people's involvement in formal meetings: a practical guide*.

Miller, J. (2003). *Never Too Young: How young children can take responsibility and make decisions*. London: **Save the Children**.

From the **United Nations**: *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*. View the full text on:

http://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/pub_detail.asp?pub_id=133

The **United Reformed Church** *Charter for Children in the Church* is available from their offices: 86 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT or www.urc.org.uk

The Rev d Steve Dixon
Manchester Diocesan Children's Officer
stephendixon@manchester.anglican.org

www.manchester.anglican.org
(children's section)

0161 828 1433

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