Children and Worship

Before offering my own observations on the angst-ridden topic of children and worship, allow me to point to some excellent resources. The United Church website features a vast array of material under Faith Formation (e.g. www.united-church.ca/cim). There you can find everything from United Church policy statements and curriculum evaluation tools, to liturgical resources and a website for kids. With or without Internet access, the Children's Ministries Newsletter* is a good way to stay in touch with what's happening (phone: 416-231-5931 or 416 231-7680). Staff persons with the All Ages Cluster of the Faith Formation and Education Unit have their fingers on the pulse of this important work.

Tell Me the Old, Old Story

Some time ago I experienced a compelling example of the recovery of biblical narrative in ministry with children. Godly Play is a method of Christian education and spiritual direction with children ages two to 12 years. Through the use of beautifully crafted materials presented in an intentionally ritualized style, the power of scripture becomes a kind of lectio divina-a prayerful, meditative telling of the biblical story. The kids are riveted and, as is often the case, the adults get just as much out of it. But this method is not for the uncommitted. It requires specific training, indicative of the importance of children in church life and faith formation. (See the United Church website or www.godlyplay.com.)

From the Didactic to the Kinesthetic

One of the things that impress me about Godly Play's approach is its kinesthetic dimensions—its stylized action and physicality. One not only listens, but participates in an event. Educational theorists tell us what good liturgists already know: we learn about, encounter, and engage the world primarily through our bodies. Body-memory is deep, profound, and primal. I'm convinced that this is what we need most in worship in general and in worship with children in particular. We suffer from sacramental minimalism. All too often, the symbols no longer speak, the rituals cease to move us, and the rational has taken precedence over the embodied. We've become all head and no body. Contrary to John's prologue, the Word seems to have become words rather than flesh. What would it mean to move from the didactic to the kinesthetic in our worship?

Less Talk, More Action

Lately, I try to prepare for worship with children not by asking "What will I say?" but "What will we do?" and "What does the gospel call us to do today?" And so, we try to talk less and act more—or at least our talk is reflection on concrete action. We join in processionals, often carrying things—banners, Bibles, candles, water, bread, gifts. We make things. We give and receive them. We don't simply look at the font or the table, we touch them and pour the water or set the table and make all things ready. We don't talk about bread, we bake it—then offer it, bless it, break it, and give it. We sing lots, preferably with movement. And often, when we lift up our arms, we find that our hearts follow more easily. Could it be that what makes for good worship with children makes for good worship, period?

William S. Kervin is Assistant Professor of Public Worship at Emmanuel College, Toronto, Ont.