

June 26, 2011

*"More on Children"*

Acts 16: 25-30

And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. <sup>26</sup>And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed. <sup>27</sup>And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. <sup>28</sup>But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here. <sup>29</sup>Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, <sup>30</sup>And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? <sup>31</sup>And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, ***and thy house.***

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Given what I said last week about welcoming children, it is possible for individuals to hear only what we are not doing, i.e. not having Confirmation Classes. Given this possibility, let me say more explicitly what we are doing.

G-5.04001 and 2 of the Presbyterian Book of Order says "The session shall have responsibility for preparing those who would become members of the congregation. While preparation is part of the continuing nurture of the congregation, particular care shall be taken to prepare children of members for public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Instruction shall be given in the meaning of this profession, the responsibilities of membership, and the faith and order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)."

First of all, *preparation is part of the continuing nurture of the congregation.* What is this *continuing nurture*? In the Presbyterian tradition, the primary means of nurturing faith (not creating it, that's a divine gift, but nurturing it) is through the corporate worship services on Sunday morning. As the Book of order states, "In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God's claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed...[and] the Spirit of God quickens people to an awareness of God's grace and claim upon their lives." This is why it is essential to have children present in the worship services, for parents who have taken upon themselves the baptismal promise to bring their child up in the Christian faith in the context of the church to bring their children to worship, and, as part of the congregational promise made at baptism to help nurture the faith of the child, for us adults to be welcoming and patient with children in worship services. Children need, just as much as we adults, to be part of the worshipping community that sings the songs and prays the prayers and tells the stories of God's love and grace present in the world and in our own lives, and, to more simply sense what it is to be part of a

community of people greater than family, and a community of people who have gathered for a purpose greater than athletic competition or economic consumerism.

A second part of the *continuing nurture of the congregation* is the pastoral care. For example, when a seven year old sees the teaching elder or members of the church visiting her grandmother or grandfather in the nursing home, this sends a message to the child that the church and faith is more than just a Sunday morning activity, it is indeed an acknowledgement of God being present in the world and in our lives everyday of the week and in all places. And not only will seeing this give a positive message and nurture faith, but there will be times, given such faithful presence, that more sustained conversations (and play) can occur as the young person indicates a need to do so.

A third aspect of the continuing nurture of the congregation has to do with the over-all health of the congregation. Children are keen observers: they will quickly pick up on whether or not our coffee hour conversations are consistent with our worship service proclamations. Children are not the future of the church, as is so often said. The future of the church depends on how well adults model mature faith, for it is this that will make a lasting enough impression on children to shape them for future service in the church. Children who hear love proclaimed in worship but then hear pettiness in the church parlor are not likely to remain attracted to the church.<sup>1</sup> The over-all health of a congregation's communications and interactions are a vital part of the *continuing nurture of the congregation*.

A fourth aspect of the *continuing nurture of the congregation* is Sunday school. As the Session has primary responsibility for preparing people for church membership, so the Session has primary responsibility in approving Sunday school teachers and the curriculum materials used by those teachers: Sunday school is not an entrepreneurial activity. The Session, via primarily the Christian Education Committee of the Session, has a responsibility to seek out and encourage teachers who have a passion for children as well as a passionate faith, teachers who will make time to not only teach a lesson but develop a relationship: while curriculum is important, faith is more caught than taught.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The exception is the co-dependent personality, who, usually do to the dysfunction in his or her own family, becomes the over-responsible rescuer. Such a person goes into ordained ministry or stays connected to the church in order to "save" the church, make everything right. After realizing and dealing with my own co-dependent personality and hidden motivations for church work nearly fifteen years ago, I have had to find other, more healthy (and less grandiose) reasons to stay in church work.

<sup>2</sup> The following is a summary of discussion of the Christian Education Committee, based on the group reading of the book, "Growing Up Christian: A Congregational Strategy for Nurturing Disciples" by C. Ellis Nelson

#### **I. Practical/administrative issues/suggestions.**

- A. Better, more formal Sunday school registration process. Have parents fill out a form, and give space during the Rally Day worship service to do so. Beyond basic info, form could include a place for email address, outside interests/commitments. Beyond Rally Day, forms available for new

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- people. Perhaps additional info about the Sunday school, curriculum, goals, etc., to be given at the time of registration.
- B. The irregular attendance of students noted as an issue.
  - C. Identified the need for materials, in addition to a standardized application, to be given to prospective teachers, such materials giving info on curriculum goals, basic beliefs/ethos of the Presbyterian Church (ex., how Presbyterians approach the Bible in a non-literal way).
  - D Identified need/desire for some type of mentoring/support system for new teachers, whether from previous teachers or superintendent(s).

## II. **Based on the Ellis book, consensus on the following,**

- A. Qualities to look for in Teacher recruitment:
  - 1. Someone whose focus is as much on relationships as curriculum;
  - 2. Someone willing to make time to be part of teacher training events;
  - 3. Someone with a demonstrated friendliness towards/enthusiasm for children.
  
- B. Qualities to look for in Sunday school curriculum materials:
  - 1. Materials based on the premise that the relationship between teacher and child is as important as the curriculum.
  - 2. Materials focused on the major *stories* of the Bible (as opposed to doctrines, ethics, social issues, and denominational history); once young people are in high school, then taking the stories to discuss ethics/doctrines/social issues, etc. is appropriate.
  - 3. A curriculum that provides materials that can be easily given to parents to use at home during the week, connecting Sunday school and home and encouraging home-based conversations/reflection/bible reading.
  
- C. Connecting Sunday school and home:
  - 1. An essential component given the little time available for Sunday school and the lack of cultural supports to the Christian faith;
  - 2. see curriculum above;
  - 3. increase the sense of importance on occasions of infant baptism, and create materials to be given to parents about the importance of their role as shapers of the child's image of God;
  - 4. Find helpful, time-sensitive ways to make parents more biblically familiar so they become more comfortable sharing bible stories at home and taking advantage of those occasional moments in the car or grocery store to share how something said/seen relates to the bible/church/faith.

Finally, but most importantly, parents are the primary shapers of a child's image of God and whatever faith a child has been given by God ( a gift, not an achievement of the child or the parents). Worship and Sunday school are, at most, an hour a week. The other 167 hours each week are what will ultimately shape a child. Parents who are equipped to help their children with their school homework, must also be equipped by the church to develop ways of talking about matters of faith with their children at home, in the car, at the grocery store, etc, again, not in order to produce or create faith, but in order to encourage and shape the gift of faith. The curriculum currently being used by the Sunday school has papers that can be taken home to encourage review and conversation. In addition, beginning in September, the church newsletters will have a monthly column offering resources and suggestions to parents.

In all of these ways, and others too numerous for mention, Yellow Frame Church is fulfilling the mission to take *particular care* in preparing children to live out their God-given faith in the church and in the world.

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#### D. Adult Christian Education.

1. Consensus that , as per the Ellis book, this is *the* critical issue because it is the adults who will teach the Sunday school classes, serve on Session/Deacons, and lead the church in ministries of education in particular and in discerning God's ways/will in general;
2. An acknowledgement that very little Adult Christian Education happens here at Yellow Frame, and even less so now that the Women's Bible Study has ended;
3. An acknowledgement that the ability for people to make time for such Adult Christian Education is a real problem;
4. An acknowledgement that having an hour dedicated to Sunday school for children and adults prior to the worship service would emphasize the importance of Adult Christian education and perhaps encourage participation, but such a significant change may also be unacceptable to many people in Yellow Frame.