

Dear Friends,

First, an apology to those of you who do not usually attend our 10.00 am services at St Mark's - because this letter mainly relates to those services. We want your views, and creative ideas!

Once a month, on the first Sunday, we have an "All Age" service - either a "Family Service" or a "Family Communion". The rationale for this is that it is good for Christians to worship together sometimes, however old or young. We want it to be clear that children are as much part of the church as adults - not just "future members". It is also the case that sometimes adults learn as much through words and activities which have consciously been made accessible to children, as through the more complex language of our normal Parish Communion. The idea of having non-eucharistic "Family Services" - as many will remember from Bill Loveless's "glory days" - is that they can be a missionary enterprise, a bridge into church life for people who aren't confirmed, or aren't fully convinced. In some circumstances, they can be immensely popular.

But we aren't finding that they are hugely popular now. Some established church members intentionally stay away from them. Even some children are happier on the days when they go into Sunday School, and prefer not to come. It's hard to gauge the degree of these reactions, because in Newnham we have such a shifting population. On any given Sunday, it's hard to tell who isn't there because they don't want to be, and who isn't there because they've gone away for the weekend.... So, numbers fluctuate a good deal.

And we do try very hard, at our "normal" Parish Communion, to make it clear that the children fully belong. Many are communicants. They start the service with us. We make it clear that their Sunday School is the equivalent of our "Ministry of the Word" in church, and we welcome them back at "The Peace". Recently we have also started the practice at the end of the service of being shown something that has been made or worked-on in the Sunday School, making the link, where possible, with the similar theme that the adults have been considering in church. The Americans have a phrase: "All-age Sunday School". That is really what we are participating in, during the time the children are out, albeit that the adults' "Sunday School" consists of hearing a sermon and responding in prayer!

What should be our way forward? One possibility, which has been considered by our Children and Youth Working Group, our Worship Working Group, our Ministry Forum, and the PCC, might be to do away with the monthly pattern of "All Age" services, and instead have four or five a year (probably all eucharistic), not necessarily tied to a "First Sunday", but on particularly suitable occasions - e.g. Mothering Sunday, Easter, Pentecost, Harvest, Christmas Day.... (This list could vary, year by year, so that some years we have a "traditional" service with a "traditional" sermon on big festivals, whilst "All Age" worship picks up on other festivals and themes.)

These services, falling less often, could involve more coordinated preparation. For example, the Sunday School could work in advance on things to bring to them - be it drama, banners, crafts, dance, or whatever. We could have a "Junior Choir" to sing at

them (alongside the main choir). We could also ask other groups in the church to prepare and contribute something. After all, a "Family Communion" is about being a whole Church family, of all ages - not just about catering for children.

We should like your views on this. There will be people who value the monthly pattern of being able to worship for a whole service with all ages present. There will be others who would be glad if this pattern were not inexorably monthly. There will be those who feel every main service should be eucharistic, and others who see a place for the non-eucharistic approach. I hope that we can all bear issues of mission in mind - what makes worship accessible to others; not just "what do I like?"

Here I must pay tribute to my colleague, Marguerite, who, over many years has put in huge efforts of preparation and reflection to engage our imaginations in different ways in All-Age worship. I hope that some of the less-cerebral ways of teaching and reflection will not be lost or diminished, but accepted as sometimes the appropriate teaching-mode even in a "normal" Parish Communion when the children are in the Halls.

I must also pay tribute to our Sunday School team, without whose good will we would not be able to consider increasing the number of Sundays on which Sunday School occurs. It amazes me that they are willing to give as much as they do - even during the school holidays. And what they do is so appreciated by the children!

We shall raise these issues briefly at the APCM on Sunday 1st April. But if you miss that opportunity to share your thoughts, please put them in writing, and give them to me before the Worship Group meeting on the 10th May, or the PCC on the 24th May, so that we can consider them in our discussions. We want to get this right - for God, for our parish and the people we hope to reach out to, for ourselves and our children as worshippers. Please pray about it before you discuss it further, or put pen to paper. That way, we will have our priorities right.

Your friend and vicar,

Maggie Guite