

LNPC's Theology of Children

By Andy & Kara Root
September 9, 2023

Children are ministers among us. We are learning to center children in the life of our congregation.

At the core of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology is his concept of *Stellvertretung*, translated as "place-sharing." Relationships that avoid instrumentality but seek to be with and for the other and no other aim, become the concrete (and yet mystical) locale of Christ's presence in the world. By sharing life and exploring faith alongside each other, we encounter Christ now, present with us, as we are present to God and to the world around us.



Some of our ministers

In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer uses the parenting relationship to define the very *Stellvertretung* of Jesus Christ himself. In relationships of communion, like that of a parent to a child, each person is uniquely an individual and yet has their being in and through each other. Faith is incoherent (and falls into works) when it is imagined outside the embodied reality of a child to a parent, outside of Jesus and his cosmic relation to the Father, and Jesus's earthly life bound to his mother. Inside relationships of individuals bound in connection Jesus Christ is concretely present in the world.

Faith may be seen as the acceptance that we are children, that we are the kind of beings that need the ministering care of others, that God desires a shared life with and for us. We have faith (and are formed in it) when we come to see that we can only have our being in and through the care, love, and connection to others who share deeply in our lives. It is inside this kind of care that we are transformed in Christ. Through the interdependence of true otherness, our being is taken up to share in the being of God, in and through the Holy Spirit.

So, formation into a Christian life is not to escape childhood, but to embrace our own identity as children of God who care for other children of God. The Christian life, because it centers on the incarnation of the Son, is impossible to imagine and live into without an embrace of childhood itself. In caring for children in the world our actions share in God's being, who is ontologically the Father to the Son, who, through the flesh, is our sibling.

This is why Bonhoeffer contends that Jesus Christ (not psychology, social theory, biology, or economics) is the inventor of childhood. After the proclamation of the incarnation—that is, the claim that God who is God has become a child—childhood is forever a mystical reality. The mystical/monastic/contemplative practices teach us again and again to be children of God. (Such mystics as the Apostle Paul and Julian of Norwich never tire of using this language). This form of care and love—this encounter of ministry—can only be experienced through practices that place us into stances of presence and reception.

But it is difficult to be present in the present! In late modernity, time itself is rushed and overaccelerated. It is challenging today to live in receptivity and openness to the presence of Christ. And while children call us deeply into the presence of God, they also call us out of it, adding to the busyness and fatigue so often experienced in our secular age.

To make matters worse, so much of today's parenting practice to young children is built on a *vita activa*, on doing more, doing right, performing as a parent. Yet, the monastic and ancient practices of prayer, meditation and spiritual direction place us in a stance of receiving, being present. Luther talks about faith moving us into a *vita passivita*, a life of reception and contemplation. And moments arrive with a child that call us back in contemplation to the mystery if we're willing to receive them. As a congregation we can practice the *vita passivita* together, and we can be led in this by our children.

Children more naturally live a life of reception and presence. The ministry of the child is to force us into the now, to feel a connective, resonant experience with our being. The child is the unique creature whose act and being are held together in presence. The child acts in the world, but always out of one's being as child, out of one's received life, not to procure resources and relevance. Rarely is the child's act instrumentalized, disconnected from being.

By lifting up the encounters and experiences children have in the world, parents, caregivers and the congregation are invited to develop eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to discern the presence and activity of God in our lives, in others and in the world. By attuning ourselves to children's mystical resonance, we allow ourselves to be ministered to, and receive from, children, as fully participatory agents of ministry and formation.

Bonhoeffer taught that the practical form of the church in the world is to "carry children." In carrying, or holding children, in ministering *with* them, we again encounter the being of the living God who acts for the world as the Son of the Father and the child of Mary. By being present to children in their lived experiences, watching and waiting for God together, practicing rhythms of prayer and contemplation, nurturing curiosity, wonder, and questions, and teaching the stories of our faith and scripture with imagination and playfulness, we help children build and sustain trust in God *with* us.

We are all children of God. We reclaim our humanity by concretely carrying children to the center of the church's life in the name of the child Jesus Christ. Seeing and caring for children as a mystical, presence-centered, communal act, has the potential to deepen the faith of the whole community, and give us a stronger sense of what it actually means to be church.

Sharing life with each other in a presence-centered spirituality means we are physically present with one another, and we also provide to each other a quality of presence, awareness, and reception of each other's personhood. (Attachment science and literature—see especially the work of Daniel Siegal and Tina Payne Bryson—also supports this kind of presence-focus). We can describe this carrying (or holding) children, as a congregation and as families, with the acronym HOLD:

Honoring the sacredness of each person as a unique child of God,
Opening our hearts to children in a grace-filled willingness to be present and receive them,
Listening to the hearts of children underneath the behaviors, and
Delighting in children as God delights in us, mirroring back to children their own belovedness.

LNPC seeks to be a place-sharing, presence-centered community of support and prayer that HOLDS children and parents. We honor the ministry of children among us. As children of God, all, we cultivate awareness of God, encounter Christ as we share life and affirm belonging, and join in God's ministry of love and care in the world by the Spirit's power.

(Adapted from material created for Youthfront's Lily-funded Presence-Centered Parenting & Caregiving Project.)