

Leadership

The Pastor, the Parent, the Precocious Child and the Pewsitter

Mr Potato-head and the Couch Potatoes go to Church

EVER SEEN THIS?

Every now and again I visit a church and I encounter a child who is running up and down the aisles, or lapping the entire congregation. No one bats an eyelid, and no one seems to be related to the child. It's almost as if this child, this person, is invisible, except that I know he or she isn't. Because I also get questions from frustrated congregation members and worship leaders, and sometimes pastors asking what to do about this precocious child.

NOT A PROBLEM, A QUESTION...

Well, for certain I can assure you that the problem is not the child. This kid is just doing what kids are totally wired to do – explore the universe – test the limits of logic and energy and mind and matter and relationship. Childhood is all about figuring out how this crazy planet, it's ecology and inhabitants, work.

In fact, let's not say we have a 'problem'. This is not a 'problem' situation. No one is about to die, or probably even to lose their faith. A few adults may be about to commit a sin of self-centredness, but we'll let that slip for the moment.

Here we have not a problem, but a question:

What kind of a bunch are we?

What kind of a community?

Who are we in light of who God is?

Who are we?

Who are we to one another?

A WORKED EXAMPLE

I walked in to a church in the opening bracket of songs. I was a visitor there, but I knew a couple of people. I felt at home and I slipped off my shoes (the Moses Manoeuvre). A preschooler was running up and down the aisle during the singing. When the music finished we all sat down, and the little boy kept running, round and round the pews. This continued for at least 5 minutes while a thoughtful worship leader led some quiet reflective prayers and meditations. No one made eye contact with the little boy. He didn't gravitate to anyone. I couldn't tell who he belonged to. I knew that this church had a crying room at the back so I slipped out of my seat and went scavenging. I came back with a great find - a box of Mr Potato Heads.



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I sat down in the middle of the aisle with the box and waited for the little boy's next lap past. Sure enough as he past me this time, he stopped and looked – and he was about to take off again, when I smiled at him and said hello and offered him a potato. Quietly, with hardly a word between us, he sat down and began to play. After a minute he put down his potatoes and began pulling off his shoes. 'I will take my shoes off too!' he said. And so I helped him. It was only fair. He had noticed that I had my shoes off...so he knew this was ok. And so we passed the service making Mr Potato Heads together, barefoot in the aisle.



A FEW CLUES:

Have some courage to engage with another person. That is what this child is.

Model a positive behaviour you can reasonably expect. (Sitting on a grown up seat that is too big for little legs, bottoms and backs doesn't cut it here.) We so often expect children to adapt to ways and facilities that are tailored to suit adult needs – which we call 'normal', but which are big and uncomfortable for little bodies.

Notice how readily my new friend wanted to be like me. "She's got her shoes off! That must be the thing to do!"

Pastors, in particular, have a powerful role here: two minutes of modelling from a pastor can achieve a seismic cultural shift that can last years. It is not the pastor's full time role to manage all of the children in the church, but the children of the congregation and the neighbourhood, are as much a pastor's opportunity and responsibility as anyone else. A small investment of modelling sets many others free to exercise their compassion and gifts and wisdom in relation to children.

Model engagement, and provide simple help to enable this. We might be 100% switched on to what's happening in church, buzzing on the inside, but to our children, we look the same as when we're couch potatoing in front of the TV – passive. When I got Mr Potato Head and started playing my little friend saw a grown up doing something, engaged. That's a language kids understand. All through my childhood my parents were avid sermon-note takers. They modelled for me active engagement in church. I saw them processing and 'getting it.' So Mr Potato Head might not be your thing – but a note book and some highlighters could be.

Just putting out a few activities 'to keep them occupied' is not in line with the aim here. The aim is for our children to be part of a worshipping discipling community. Children do not need activities, as much as they need mentors and fellow travellers.

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Parents:

Be confident in your relationships with your children, that you can read what they need and respond wisely. When you are in church you are in a home. Parent using all of the resources available. Use all of the hymn books in your row to build the tower of Babel. Use the space to let your little one stretch out and have a back rub. Ask another person for some help – it's the church for goodness sake! We are here to bear one another's burdens.

One of the hardest places to parent is driving in the car, where you and your children are strapped in place. You're isolated, and your access to resources is limited. It is tough – it is understandably the site of many family meltdowns.



But in church we are not strapped in, we are free to stand, to move, to be on our knees, (heck! To fall on our faces if the Spirit would so bring us there.) I sometimes see people in church looking like they are buckled in – frozen to the spot. These imaginary 'seat belts' are doubly diabolically destructive when they reinforce our sense of individualism, of staying separate from others.

Whatever the invisible constraints are that have immobilised us, we need to cast them off.

I often have conversations (quietly) with my children through church – I ask them what they think of what just happened, or if they noticed something different in the decor – a new poster, a stunning flower we don't often see, a different shaped communion loaf. Church is a time of gathering and relationship, not of individual devotion – so conversation, moving to be alongside another, and of appropriate warm physical intimacy, of extra whispered prayers and facing each other not the front, all belong in church.

The pastor, the parent and the pewsitter and the precocious child are all exactly the same in God's eyes. Remembering that we are all in this together, and that there is no other agenda than being the body of Christ together for the sake and service of the world helps re-order our in-church anxieties.

We often think that it's important that we get through a song without stopping. Or that the sermon is delivered un-interrupted, or that we have smooth flows from one 'item' to another (as if it were a talent show or an AGM – or worst of all a mix of both!).

None of this 'doing' is as important as who we are as the gathering of those who are in the process of being saved. When our relationships with one another are right we can pick up our offering and proceed to the altar – but not before.