Fundamental to the way our church practices worship is the notion of the priesthood of all believers. That is, we take seriously the idea that every participant in the life of the church has pastoral and ministerial gifts to offer the congregation. We take this concept further than most by claiming that, whether or not they are baptised (and in most Baptist churches they are not), children, too, are members of the body of Christ and as such they have gifts to share.

As such, too, they have a need to worship God, a need which isn’t met by taking them out of the worship service to engage in Sunday school activities (however excellent the activities). We believe too that faith is not something we get when we have learned enough stuff, but is a gift from God, encouraged and nurtured by exposure to the patterns of the faithful. Children and other catechumens obtain this exposure primarily by standing alongside the faithful as they engage in worship; the relationships they build there will carry into all other aspects of church life.

So for their sake and ours, children are full participants in our worship service. To enable this, we have had to interrogate our worship practice and find ways to enable their participation, and we have had to be honest about the parts of the service that don’t work for them. Overall, we have added more music, movement and activity to our service; we have provided art and other materials for them to use during the silence and sermon to respond to the readings; and we have changed some of our views on what constitutes a worshipful stance.

We have found that their participation has been a great gift. We included them primarily for their own sake, but the rewards have been abundant. In their freedom of movement, children have given us permission to move around the service more freely ourselves. In their avid curiosity and absorption, we have been challenged out of our distraction and encouraged to pay attention. In their hugs and in the way they welcome others in each week, they have modelled loving pastoral care. In their absolute trust, they demonstrate very real faith.

At times, the actions of one child or another has shocked and challenged us, even brought us to tears. One Easter, a little girl sobbed inconsolably at the foot of the cross, a living reminder of the women who stood watch while Jesus died. Another child once spontaneously decorated the communion table with an intricate and beautiful pattern of flowers. One of my own children sang out into the long silence one week, *God loves you!* We name these actions as gifts, even when they feel like interruptions and challenge our adult preference for quiet participation in the service.

Their presence has reminded us that Jesus came to us as a real little baby, who cried and wore nappies and kept his parents up nights; and that, as a grown man, he welcomed little children, encouraged them to draw near, and instructed his disciples to become more like them, with all their eruptions into the silence, difficult questions, vulnerability, wonder, trust, unquestioning love, and ecstatic expressions of joy.
They have been a tangible reminder of what it is to be childlike, and, no matter what our age, have challenged all of us to investigate our role as a child of God.

Further, by investigating the accessibility of our service to children and by broadening our modes of prayer and response, we have learned that worshipping with all our senses offers a fuller experience than that of worshipping with words alone. All of us, not just children, respond to a variety of forms of communication, whether in worship or other aspects of life.

After all, not every adult functions well in the cognitive realm; not every adult is literate, fluent or capable of abstract reasoning. By welcoming our children into the worship service and meeting their needs, we have made ourselves more open to adults who operate in more visual or sensory modes, and to adults with disabilities. We have discovered that the marginalisation of children from worship can obscure who else is being excluded; bringing them in brings others in, too.

And we are all children in God’s eyes. For us as church leaders, the challenge is to take seriously the needs and gifts of all of the children of God – young and old, able and physically challenged, quick witted and slow, tongue-tied and fluent, cerebral and artistic, English speaking and not, and everyone in between –, to find ways for every one of us to be not an audience, but full participants in the life of the church. If we are up to the challenge, then the good news is that we might just find ourselves becoming the glorious, messy, joyful, chaotic, rowdy, unpredictable, uncontrollable body of Christ, radically inclusive and kaleidoscopic in its gifts – which is exactly we are called to be.

- Alison Sampson, September 2010