Although we strive to listen to and honour the voices of children in our ministry, the reality is that often this is not achieved. Could it be that the structures in which we carry out our ministry actually seek to silence children's voices by labelling them and (albeit unintentionally) exert power of them? This is known as "colonization". Can children and family ministry be explored in another way - a way which seeks to reclaim and foreground the voice of the child? This paper will explore such a possibility.

Three short vignettes

In beginning this short paper, I would like to consider three short vignettes about children in the Church:

1. Rebecca was baptized at two weeks of age. Every week she was taken to the parish Eucharist. She was a great delight to the congregation, which consisted largely of older people. As a baby she was “shared” by the congregation until the moment came to receive the Eucharistic elements, at which point her parents held her for a blessing. As she grew and became more vocal, she realized, one Sunday, that she was “missing out” since she did not receive the bread. It seemed she was not accepted. Rebecca asked, “Where’s mine?” (cf Carter, 2007).

2. To prepare the congregation for this transgenerational and child-friendly worship, I preached a sermon about the necessity of having the whole community together worshipping God as an act of spiritual formation. The negative response I got from one member of the congregation was “Having children in the worship service disturbs my worship of God.” (cf Beckwith, 2004).
3. I have a friend who is the children’s pastor at a large midwestern church. Each week he has to give a report to the senior pastor citing how many children have been “saved” in his programs. (cf Beckwith, 2004).

Each of these three vignettes is an example of how the Church, albeit unintentionally, silences, excludes, or treats children as a special case in need of salvation. Each is an example of how the Church is involved in the act of colonizing children. What does this word “colonizing” mean? How might it be relevant to our work in children’s ministry?

Colonization

When we think about the word “colonization”, we tend to think about the physical taking over or settling of land by a so-called dominant nation to build an empire, or to create imperialist structures. For example, the British colonized Australia, and the Portuguese colonized Brazil with such aims in mind. It is also a concept that tends to be associated with the past and with conquests that no longer occur. However, when colonization is limited to a particular time and place in history, we miss seeing similar experiences which even today impact on marginalised people all over the world. In other words, colonization still happens today. There are many unchallenged legacies of colonialism, typically expressed in the fixing of socially constructed categories as truth.

Similarly, colonization has often been associated with indigenous people, and the way in which the so-called dominant culture exerted power over them. Much has been written about this (for example, Battiste, 2000; Smith, 2001). However, Swadener and Mutua (2007) also stress the importance of considering colonization beyond indigenous contexts. If we broaden our understanding of colonization in this way, then it can be seen as a way of “representing, producing/inscribing, and consuming the Other through silencing and denial of agency” (p. 191) which stretches beyond specific places and times in history. In other words, the process of colonization is recognised as being at work whenever particular structures act to silence specific
groups of people, such as children, through the ways they construct and consume knowledge and experiences about such groups.

This is interesting, because, generally speaking, children in recent times have been given considerable voice and agency in all sorts of arenas in life. Charters such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) gave children the right to participate in decisions which affect them (Article 12), the right to freedom of expression (Article 13), and the right to thought, conscience and religion (Article 14). As a result, children are today are increasingly heard in relation to all sorts of issues, including opinions in matters of teaching, health, family separation and child protection. In general terms, children now have more opportunities to express their views and to shape their experiences than ever before in history (Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008).

So, why then, when it comes to religious and spiritual matters, are children’s voices effectively silenced? Why are children often (although not always) seen as the “church of tomorrow” – when they have grown and matured – rather than as having a positive contribution to make in the here-and-now? Why, in some Christian traditions, are children denied the opportunity to come to the table and to share in Communion, until they are deemed as being old enough? It is as if the church sees them as not ready, that is, they are lacking in some way and in need of salvation. This is colonization because it exerts power of children, and “keeps them in their place”. It marginalizes them, categorizes them, and silences them. Of course the Church did not deliberately set out to do this (...or did it?). Nonetheless, by denying children voice and agency, the Church has colonized them...and dare I say it, most of us who actively work in children’s ministry.

Postcolonial perspectives

Perhaps we need to begin to look at children and children’s ministry in our communities through a “postcolonial”, or “decolonizing lens”. What does this mean? It concerns the process of valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding the voices of those who are silenced through colonizing
practices (Swadener & Mutua, 2007), in this instance, children. It also concerns questions of privilege, and of the decentering of privilege (Rogers & Swadener, 1999). But we need to be careful. Decolonization does not consist of a neat set of simple solutions. There is no one model for decolonial practice, since such a model would in fact be likely to colonize (Cannella and Viruru, 2004). Those who attempt to create such models would create for themselves positions as colonizers. That is why, in this paper, I do not suggest any specific ways in which to address this issue. Rather, decolonial practice must hold in tension a number of ideas which seem opposite to each other. It must be emergent while at the same time planned. It must be individual while at the same time community-based. Further, it must “recognise dominant discourses while at the same time turning them upside down” (p. 124).

However, it possible to ask questions which may lead us to reconsider our practice in children’s ministry. Adapted from the work of Cannella and Viruru (2004), the following questions may provide a critical disposition from which those of us in children’s ministry might begin to view (or at least to consider) our work with children through a decolonizing lens:

- Is children’s ministry/how is children’s ministry producing and perpetuating forms of exclusion through practices?
- What is the position of privilege that is created by unconscious ways of functioning that is/are Western and/or dominant (for example, knowledge, theories)?
- How can we in children’s ministry honour the voices of children without imposing predetermined ideas of saving, as well as who needs saving, from what, and why?
- How can our work in children’s ministry be conceived of in ways which places value on the children’s experiential ways of knowing?
- Can children’s ministry honour both the creativity of the children as well as being faithful to the orthodoxy of the Tradition?
• How can we in children’s ministry critique our own practice to ensure that power is not generated for one group over another?

In essence, each of the above questions really asks us to consider the ways in which we can consciously foreground and begin to take seriously the voices and actions of children in our ministry with them. Do we authentically seek to include them – in worship, in decision-making, in planning, in discussion? Do we view children as members of the church in the here-and-now, rather than as ‘future members’ who do not as yet have a voice? Do we take seriously their experiences and attempts to know God? Jerome Berryman (2009) reminds us that children are, in fact, theologians who seek meaning and direction in life in relation to their existential issues and concerns. Do we really see children in this way? Do we respect their theological inquiry (albeit that it might seem or appear to be somewhat different from our own)?

Perhaps, in some instances, we believe that we already take seriously the voices of. Maybe so. But is our inclusion of children tokenistic? Do we consciously act on what they have to say (or teach us)? Or, as Peter Privett, a Godly Play trainer from England asked recently when he was in Sydney, do we actually allow children to minister to us (as well as us as adults ministering to them)? Similarly, and in a very provocative way, Berryman (2009) challenges us to think of children as sacraments, and as a means of grace:

The children’s faces embody Christ’s presence at least as much as the bread and wine do...Part of the strangeness of thinking about children as sacraments is that we are accustomed to thinking about sacraments as being something we can control better than children, like a touch, oil, water, bread, or wine (p. 231).

Considering our work in children’s ministry from a postcolonial perspective enables us to ask and to ponder such questions. Indeed, considering our work in children’s ministry from postcolonial perspectives enable us to dare to imagine and think of children as sacrament – as signs of God’s
presence – not in some future manifestation of the church, but rather in the here-and-now. In doing so, congregations will become health places, and the church will no longer be a place of ambivalence, ambiguity, or indifference to anyone. As Berryman (2009) reminds us, the church will be a place of grace.

References


