

Children in an Intergenerational Church Community: Lessons for the Church of Scotland from the Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Abstract

For over fifty years, the number of children participating in the life of the Church of Scotland has been declining, leading some to call for a reconsideration of the place of children in the Church. This dissertation begins that work by seeking to establish a theological rationale for the place of children within an intergenerational church community. Beginning with an exploration of how the societal changes brought about by universal education led to the birth of the Sunday School Movement, the development of an age-segregated model of church is outlined. It is shown that this has led to a situation where a child's experience of church is primarily educational, with an adult as teacher and child as learner, and in which relationships are used to influence a child towards a particular end. Attention is then turned to the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in search of normative criteria for an alternative model. Bonhoeffer's understanding of Jesus Christ as the incarnate, crucified and resurrected God-man, combined with his concepts of personhood, church-community and *Stellvertretung* ("place-sharing") are considered and it is shown that a child can and should play a full part in an intergenerational community. This leads to a call to the Church to move from age-segregation to intergenerationality, from an educational to an experiential model, from being unidirectional (adult-to-child) to mutual place-sharing, and from using relationships as means to gain influence to understanding relationships as an end in themselves in which Christ is revealed. 'Rules of art' are presented to outline the changes this requires in the mindset of the church, but also in its practice of worship, formation and hospitality. What emerges is a picture of church as an intergenerational space of hospitality, where all ages serve and are served by one another, experiencing formation through encounter with the living Christ present in their relationships.

How do we move

- from age-segregated to intergenerational
- from educational to experiential
- from one-directional (adult-to-child) relationships to mutual place-sharing
- from relationships used for influence to relationships as revelatory