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Introduction

‘Nooooooo!’

The prospect of all-age worship can easily produce a cry of anguish from... well, from so many people.

‘Is it Junior Church this week?’ ask the children. ‘No, it’s the first week of the month—we’re together today!’ declares their leader gleefully, to be met by eight-year-old sagging shoulders, grumbles and pouts.

‘All-age worship again!’ sighs the minister, desperately short of time to prepare anything other than a standard liturgy-based service rather than the moving and life-changing worship experience she has read about, using a ten-foot-high, all-singing, all-dancing, glow-in-the-dark visual aid made from recycled eggboxes.

‘Oh. The children are in, are they?’ comes the less-than-enthusiastic response from the 40-something single person, echoed by the weary father of three who was hoping for half an hour of peace and quiet and now can only look forward to an hour of embarrassment and crowd control.

It’s time to be real. It’s time to admit that worship with all ages present is easy to do appallingly and difficult to do well. It’s time to acknowledge that it takes a huge amount of grace from every participant. But it’s also time to admit that a church that unthinkingly packs off any subgroup, old or young, to worship and learn in another space every week could well be as daft as a person merrily cutting off his own leg. It’s as ridiculous as that.

A great deal has been written about all-age worship. There are many suggested service outlines for inclusive church

services. So what's special about this book?

This book is for those who sense that worshipping God together is probably a good thing, but are nervous of trying to lead their church towards that vision. It tries to stay grounded in reality. It doesn't zoom off into glorious impracticalities involving rotating stages, 90 hours of preparation and prayer equipment that costs a tenner a head. It takes account of the rich variety of church life in all its stubbornness, selfishness, wistfulness and bewilderment. It acknowledges that we don't live in a perfect world and that no one person—certainly not I—has all the answers. It also recognises that you are the expert for the ways in which your church can best worship God, and anything that is suggested within these pages needs to be sifted through your own opinion and adapted for your own local setting.

Chapter 1 asks if church should be all-age when it is so difficult to achieve. Chapter 2 stands back to look at what church worship is about, as a background to considering all-age worship more specifically. Chapter 3 considers the key part that relationship has to play in our church services, while Chapter 4 suggests some rules of thumb for running all-age services. Chapter 5 acknowledges that this is a terrifying prospect for some people and is about helping a congregation cope with change, and Chapter 6 provides some practical details and service examples. It's a big-picture overview of why we might try to do all-age worship, with hands-on detail to show that it isn't just pie in the sky.

What I'm *not* trying to do is to supply another set of *Super All-Age Services for Septuagesima* or suggest *Ten Handy Hints for Praying Together Without Tears*. This book isn't a tick list of *Five Ways To Make Your Worship Mean Something To Everyone* or *1000 Easy Talks for the Whole Family*.

No, this book tries to bring together some of the current bigger thinking about why it's good to worship together. We need to understand why we're not taking the easier 'traditional' option of segregation, before we work out the hows and whats. But the hows and whats are important, so later chapters concentrate on principles and practical ideas for worshipping together.

The book also concentrates on the aspect of worship that is the gathered community of Christians coming together to praise God, meet him and learn about him—what we traditionally see as 'a church service'. This book hasn't got space to explore the bigger idea of what church is, or how worship happens in every part of life: it will concentrate on why we might worship corporately, and what we might do in that time together.

Is it time to confess that although this book concentrates on 'all-age' worship, I hate the term? I find it very misleading but I can't think of an alternative that doesn't sound offensive to the rest of church—'everybody church'; 'church for anyone'; 'whole church'? Surely all church should always be for anyone? The reason for my problem with '*all-age*' church is that, although we know it's emphasising a particular aspect of church, it assumes that the only significant difference between people is their age. 'Intergenerational worship' as a term has the same problem, and as for 'family service'—with the history of the family service in the Anglican Church and the tensions surrounding what people assume we mean when we talk about 'family'—I run a mile from it. I can only hope that 'all-age' is one of those terms that will see us through a period of change in the church and, in 50 years, will be laughably quaint and redundant. As soon as we call worship 'all-age', we divide people solely by the number of years they

have been alive, not by their depth of spirituality, how long they have been a Christian, how they prefer to learn, what their strengths are, how deeply committed to Christ they are, or any other definition that tries to grasp the happy diversity of the people whom Christ has called to follow him. So in this book we'll step back and start to look at the people in our churches in other ways than by age: perhaps we'll be surprised.

All-age questions challenge the very heart of what churches are doing. They encourage us to re-evaluate what we do and why we do it. At this time of new opportunities for being church in different ways, let's keep asking, 'How can we be the best churches that we possibly can?'

In recent years, BRF's *Barnabas* children's team has been thinking through the issues around all-age worship and has been leading sessions for church groups across the country on the subject, in many different settings and across the denominations. It began as a common interest and has developed into a passion. We have shared the experience of members of the Intergenerational Forum, which started life under the leadership of CPAS (Church Pastoral Aid Society) and has continued independently. Apart from the invaluable insights gained from other team members and the people we have worked with at these events, most of my own experience in this area has come through our local parish work with Messy Church.

I've written about Messy Church more fully elsewhere, but, in brief: in 2004 a group of children's leaders in our Anglican church near Portsmouth decided that if we really wanted to make an impact on the lives of children, the most effective and far-reaching way was to try to work with the whole family unit, not with children in isolation from the people who have

most influence on them—those who are bringing them up. We devised a pattern of church centred around the needs and wants of families who find it hard to belong to traditional Sunday church. So the timing, the frequency, the activities and length of sessions and the application of the Bible all come from the needs of this group of people. The emphasis is on a relaxed welcome, a choice of hands-on creative activities, some celebration time to bring all our worship before God and enjoy story, song and prayer together, and eating together at tables.

As Messy Church became established and started developing, not just in our own church but across the UK and beyond, thanks to the promotion by Fresh Expressions and the efforts of BRF's *Barnabas* ministry team, it became increasingly apparent that encouraging ages and generations to worship together appeals to people in and outside church and seems to speak of God's longing for wholeness in a divided world. So, despite the temptations we face to reduce it to a 'children's church' or to water down the celebration and other activities to a lowest common denominator, we keep on struggling to respond to the needs and aspirations of the whole age range, not just those of children. It is difficult to keep focused on being genuinely all-age. It's hard to break away from the traditional view that any event with children present is purely and simply a children's event. It's a challenge to worship and learn alongside children rather than turning the processes into a one-way flow in which 'we have the answers and you need to learn from us'. There's so much left to find out, but as we gradually draw together the lessons we are learning from the different Messy Churches across the country, in their very different social situations, perhaps the wider church can benefit from them.

You can read more about the Messy Church journey in the books *Messy Church* and *Messy Church 2*, as well as on the website (www.messychurch.org.uk), where you can also find information about Messy Fiesta days. These days give opportunities for Messy Church leaders and potential leaders to find out more about this way of being church and to share ideas about the way forward.

Through the *Barnabas* children's team network and through our links with similarly-minded colleagues in different denominations, we are learning something about God's love of wholeness, about the paradox of bringing together as many differences as possible in order to become as much like him as possible, about the joy of working with messily imperfect situations, and about a growth to maturity that depends on being together rather than separated. For some people, this is self-evident and they will need to read no further. For me, and for many people I've met over the last few years, it is the sort of epiphany that lights up a whole new outlook on how we could be church. As we set out to look at these huge and exciting questions, here is a manifesto for all-age church, a 'working document' that underpins our thinking. It is by no means perfect and complete but it helps to summarise something of our passion for being church for all ages.

A manifesto for all-age church

We believe in God who created us for him and for each other.

We believe in Jesus who welcomes young and old without exception.

We believe in the Holy Spirit who transforms the life of all believers, young and old.

We believe in meeting God most intimately in the lives of those who are different from ourselves.

We believe in a church which reflects God, the three in one.

We believe we grow closer to Jesus as his disciples when we:

- worship God in a variety of ways, both familiar and different.
- worship in community as well as individually.
- worship in a way that encourages everyone to participate.
- worship in a way that both enriches and is enriched by our everyday life.
- worship God with all that we are.

Copyright issues

CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International) can give churches copyright cover for reproducing song words, playing films and recorded music and much more, and help you to make sure you're legal as you do so. All the information and advice is available on their website: www.ccli.co.uk.

- Chapter 1 -

Should church be all-age?

An all-age picture

The icon of the Trinity by Andre Rublev has been used by many fresh expressions of church in the last few years, so much so that it seems almost clichéd in some circles. In case you, like me, haven't come across it until recently, this is what it looks like: a trio of strangely similar yet different figures, in robes, sitting around three sides of a table on which is a cup and a plate of bread. Their robes blend colours of earthy browns, growing greens, diaphanous gold and heavenly blues. One of the three is gesturing towards the cup. They seem to be still, yet oddly full of action under the surface: the icon has a very dynamic quality. You feel that at any minute they might start to eat, begin an animated conversation, get up and dance or go and fetch someone else to fill in the empty space.

In the background are three landscapes—a city, a rocky mountain and some trees. Perhaps these are Abraham and Sarah's three visitors at the oaks at Mamre, described in Genesis 18. Perhaps they are simply the three persons of the Trinity sitting around a heavenly feast. Perhaps it is a picture of what church could be like at its best—glorying in intimate fellowship but open and welcoming to outsiders; full of people who have plenty in common but remain distinct from each other; a community that draws from the past but looks to what is yet to come; diverse but unified, echoing in its very

nature a God who is diverse yet unified, three in one.

If this is a picture of what Christian community could be, it is both beautiful and disturbing—disturbing because it's very hard for many of us to see either ourselves as individuals or our church communities in their painful, selfish, petty, struggling realities reflected in this tranquil icon. The ideal is so far from the reality. The picture would be unbalanced without any one of the three characters, and without the unseen observer who at the moment takes up the fourth place—the outsider welcomed in. As a parable of the Church, it speaks of interdependency, the enjoyment of being together. It relishes the differences between the members, seeing those differences not as something that creates conflict and disharmony but as something that is essential for the bigger picture—complementary, not jarring. Also, of course, it invites us to think about the person not yet in the picture, the watcher on the outside, the person on the edge who is waiting to be called to the table.

On their own the colours are beautiful enough, but together they gain significance by their very differences. The icon is a challenge and a vision of what might be.

Speaking of colours, it's time for some light relief. Here's a story to introduce the idea of diversity.

The rainbow that nearly wasn't

God rubbed his hands in glee. The terrible flood was over! There were the animals coming out of the ark—trotting, wobbling, slithering, flying or trundling down on to the mountaintop—and there were Noah and his family building the altar to say 'thank you' for their rescue. God had a lovely

surprise ready for them, something that would finish off their adventure with a beautiful ending, to be remembered for thousands of years to come.

‘Oh, colours!’ called God. ‘It’s your big moment!’

The gorgeous colours appeared around God’s throne, but God could see that something wasn’t right. Orange was scowling. Red was grumpy. Blue was kicking the floor. Green was in a strop. Yellow had turned his back on everyone else and Purple seemed about to burst into tears.

‘What in heaven is going on?’ asked God.

The first colour to speak was Red.

‘You said you wanted to put a bow in the sky,’ she said. ‘Well, I think it should be red. Just red. Nothing but red. Don’t mess about with this bunch of losers. Make it red.’

‘Why?’ asked God.

‘Red is the boss of the colours. People really notice red. Red is hot and bright—the colour for fire and blood and traffic signs. If you want this bow to be noticed, you need it to be red.’

‘I see,’ murmured God.

‘No! No! No! No!’ squeaked Yellow. ‘Your bow should be a beautiful yellow colour, Lord! Make it as yellow as the sunshine! As yellow as bananas! Make it bright and cheerful and shiny as me! Make it just yellow!’

‘You are very beautiful,’ agreed God.

‘But you’re not as important as me!’ Purple said pompously. ‘Look! It’s obvious the bow should be purple. Purple is the colour of emperors and kings. Purple is the sign of the most important. If you want power, pick pure purple.’

‘I do like purple,’ he said.

‘But you don’t want a poxy purple bow!’ shouted Green.

‘Wheee! Look at me! Imagine a green bow in the sky! Now that would be really wow! Green is so zingy! So fizzy! So fresh! Like a bottle of green limeade sprayed across the sky. Don’t mix me up with these other dull colours—make your bow green!’

‘Oh please,’ called Orange. ‘It’s so obvious that orange is the colour you want. Orange like the sunrise. Orange is fruity and juicy and ripe! Make your bow orange, Lord!’

‘You are so, like, unhip, man,’ said Blue. ‘It is so, like, obvious that God’s bow should be blue. Blue as the sea and sky, blue like rhythm ‘n’ blues. Blue like Sonic the Hedgehog blue. Blue is like the coolest colour in your box, Lord. I just know you’re going to make your bow blue blue blue.’

Instantly all the colours started shouting at each other.

‘Blue is boring!’

‘Red is rubbish!’

‘Purple’s pathetic!’

‘Yellow is so last year!’

‘Green is gross!’

‘Orange sucks!’

‘Make your bow red! Blue! Yellow! Orange! Green! Purple!’

God raised one hand and spoke in a voice that no one could disobey. ‘Be quiet.’

When the colours had settled down, trembling, God smiled at them.

‘You are all just what I want you to be. Each of you does a different job. Without you, I couldn’t do this most important job of all. I need to give my people a sign of my promise. I need them to know it is a perfect promise that will never be broken. I need them to know that it is for *all* people of *all* ages from *all* countries for *all* times. And so, my

dear dear colours, I need you all. Please, just for a moment, look at each other through my eyes.’

The colours looked at each other and, now that they were looking through God’s eyes, they saw how beautiful each of the others was. With a big smile, they stood together and together counted, ‘Three, two, one...’ Down below, the humans and animals looked up in wonder, for there, between heaven and earth, shone a radiant multicoloured rainbow. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple. All different. All beautiful. All together.

Add some coloured flags, a set of ribbons in rainbow colours, a different action for the audience to do at the mention of each colour’s name and you have a story to appeal to your visual learners, your auditory learners and your kinaesthetic ones (people who learn best by seeing, listening and being active respectively) all at the same time, as well as a story that can be taken at several different levels. It could be a good learning experience for people with all these learning styles—but more of that later.

For the moment, it is obvious to any listener or reader of that story that it would be completely inappropriate of God to omit a colour from the rainbow or to give pre-eminence to any one colour just because it thinks it is the most important. Yet it takes the supernatural effort of ‘looking at each other through God’s eyes’ to reach the point where they can all accept each other as equal partners in the job they have to do. We shouldn’t underestimate the supernatural grace needed to be an all-age church. It is never going to be the easy option, but that doesn’t stop it being the best option—perhaps the only option for a church called to be Jesus’ ambassadors in the world.

Reflecting the diversity of God

As Jesus' ambassadors, we need to reflect the fullness of our creating, redeeming and sustaining God. The Rublev icon gives us a picture of diversity in unity—perhaps a family at its best, laughing around a table, a community where the outsider is graciously and generously welcomed. This is a place where everyone can be themselves—indeed, needs to be themselves or the bigger picture is thrown out of kilter—a place where every person is welcome, regardless of age. Here, the kaleidoscopic mix of differences reflects the glorious God we worship and brings us closer to him and to each other.

A community of differences

In church, we have one of the few opportunities in Western society to be a real all-age community, a community where cerebral learning (head learning) is only one aspect of lifelong maturing. In church, people of all sorts can come together and be vulnerable together and grow together. It's a place where the power balance is turned upside down and the nobodies have as much clout as the somebodies—not because everybody is the same, but because everybody is needed for their differences.

Our diversity is something to celebrate. We are gloriously different—and not just in age.

- We learn in different ways.
- We have different personalities.
- We have different intellectual abilities.

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- We have different verbal/reading abilities.
- We have different physical abilities.
- We have different world experiences.
- We have different spiritual experiences.
- We have different emotional experiences.
- We have different powers of concentration.
- We come from different cultures and home backgrounds.

What else could you add to this list?

So why, in church, do we traditionally focus on the difference in age? Why do we send children and teenagers out of the main body of the worshipping community? Why don't we segregate people according to their reading age or their learning preference, their concentration span, what sort of chair they like to sit on, their preferred newspaper, their spiritual maturity, their emotional maturity or their open or closed personality? As soon as we start listing all the glorious differences between us, it becomes ridiculous to try to hive just one subsection off to worship or learn in isolation. Yet children are the one subgroup that many churches deliberately and systematically exclude from the worshipping body of the church.

The Revd Eric Kyte, an Anglican vicar in Yorkshire and supporter of the Intergenerational Forum, tells of an all-age service that turned upside down his expectations about what would appeal to whom.

We did an all-age service where the theme was the Sower. The parable was enacted by throwing bean seed over the congregation and the 'Word' was 'plant the seed and bring it back next time'. The idea being, many would forget, some wouldn't hear, etc.—you get

the picture. The following month, as it was August, there were no children present but all the old ladies turned up with bean plants!

Let's not think that we can lump people of a certain age bracket together and assume that they all need the same thing.

A thought-provoking activity to try to illustrate these assumptions involves printing out the personality profiles from the Appendix (see pages 174–180) on to separate cards. Distribute the cards so that everyone has one. Then ask people to imagine they are the character described on their card and to make decisions accordingly. Depending on your group, you might ask them to move about the room as described below, or you might invite them simply to talk about the different aspects in character, either in small groups or gathered together.

Say:

I'm going to call out some aspects of our church life. I'd like you to go and stand on an imaginary line down the middle of the room. Stand at this end if your character strongly agrees with the issue, and stand at the other end if your character strongly disagrees. Of course, you might pick a middle-of-the-road position in the middle of the line. So stand where you need to be...

- if you can read all the song words without an effort.
- if you've been a Christian long enough to know it isn't all fun and games.
- if you like to feel free to clap during songs.
- if you like the talk to go into a subject in depth (and take a long time over it).

- if dancing makes you cringe.
- if you're happy to pray out loud.
- if you understand the word 'redemption'.
- if you get worried or scared when open and honest emotion is shown.
- if you love colour and brightness.
- if you hate moving out of your seat.
- if you're at church because someone else has made you come.
- if you like peace and quiet.

You might also swap cards and try the same activity again with people taking different characters.

At the end, bring everyone together and find out what insights they have gained from the activity. Ask how relevant they think it is to the congregation in your own church. Ask if any changes need to be made in the light of what they have learned.

If God had wanted us to be the same, it would have been very easy. I've been revising GCSE Science with my 15-year-old and feel that I know more than I want to know about cuttings, clones, gametes and the difference between asexual reproduction and sexual reproduction. But it's impossible to get away from the fact that human beings work best when the genes are given a good mix-up: diversity is good, even in the very building blocks of life. It is certainly messy and unpredictable and risky, but so is the creative process for artists and sculptors, poets and engineers.

Church is about life and growth, so it makes sense to look to biology for hints as to where and when growth takes place and what fosters life. For instance, the Science

GCSE mnemonic MRS GREN reminds us of the signs of life: movement, respiration, sensitivity, growth, reproduction, excretion, nutrition. These signs can be a useful way of looking at church services afresh:

- **Movement:** How much movement is there in your services?
- **Respiration:** Are your services a breath of fresh air?
- **Sensitivity:** Do all the senses get the chance to be exercised in your services?
- **Growth:** Are individuals growing in faith and understanding?
- **Reproduction:** Are people joining your church?
- **Excretion:** Do your services help people to process what's going on in their lives and leave behind anything unhelpful or burdensome?
- **Nutrition:** Are you offering a balanced and healthy range of ways to nourish all sorts of people?

Life comes from diversity. It happens on the edge of things. It is unpredictable and messy and breaks out in uncontrollable ways. Is there room for it in your church?

Church history in the UK

Let's return to the question: why, in churches, do we segregate people according to their age? One answer might be found in the history of church.

The imaginary St Sluggit's Church is typical of many UK churches in the 21st century: it has a Sunday school during the morning service. The children are 'in' for the first 20 minutes of the service, then they are prayed for and they leave for their 'session', which lasts until the 'main service' ends.

This model has its origins in the Sunday school movement of Robert Raikes, back in the 18th century. Raikes was so appalled by the degeneracy of children from impoverished households, and their lack of education, that he gathered them together on a Sunday and taught them how to read and write so that they had a hope and a future.

But hang on, let's stand back and look at this. What has it got to do with the situation in the UK today? Our children are all in compulsory education from around the age of four, being taught by lean keen professionals to read and write. The church is not called on to provide this service any longer; nor is it even qualified to do so in this day and age. So why do we send the children out of the service? Because we have always done it? Because they are happier to go than to stay? Because we want to get some heavy teaching done in 'real' church without their distracting presence? Ouch. The church has got into some bad habits over the years and, arguably, this habit of sending its children out and learning and worshipping in discrete segments of congregation is one of the worst. Why have we done it?

The Sunday schools of the 19th century were walking between general education and religious education, and gradually specialised in religious education as general education through state schools became more widespread. 'One inheritance of the twentieth century was large Sunday Schools in which children and people of all ages were taught together.'¹ One notable example of this was when George Cadbury (of chocolate fame) ran a Sunday school for boys and men. In roughly the first half of the 20th century, children were sent to Sunday school, which usually happened at a different time from the main Sunday service. Parents who only occasionally, if ever, attended church themselves would send their children to

Sunday school nonetheless: ‘Sunday Schools were associated with churches but in many places had developed a separate identity. Relatively few children progressed through the Sunday School to become members of the Church.’² Around the middle of the century, numbers in these mega Sunday schools started to drop, perhaps because more people owned cars and had more opportunities for leisure activities at weekends. Sunday school began to be run at the same time as the Sunday service.

Aha! This is where things could have taken a whole new helpful direction, especially for those families in which both adults and children were churchgoers. But instead of trying to find a way for adults and children to worship and learn together, churches went down the road of segregation, keeping children and adults apart for Christian worship and nurture.

The Family Church Movement became increasingly popular from the 1940s through to the 1970s, especially in the nonconformist churches and in the ‘Parish Communion’ movement in the Church of England, which children were supposedly encouraged to attend. I suspect, however, that by this time it was impossible to reintegrate children into church services that had done without them for many years—if, indeed, children have ever played an active part in gathered church in this country. Perhaps ‘family services’ were one-way adaptations: in welcoming children and trying to cater for them, they didn’t go the difficult extra mile and help the adults try to learn from and alongside children as well. The service pattern of St Sluggit’s has become the easiest option, the option that pleases most people, young and old—worshipping in our separate ways, encouraging the children to leave for their child-centred ‘activities’ while the

adults settle down to ‘proper’ church. However, is the easiest option, or the most popular option, necessarily the best way to build God’s kingdom?

All-age worship in the Bible

We can compare this historical development in the UK with the biblical mandate for worshipping with all ages present. The biblical mandate has been explored in detail elsewhere by wiser writers than I am,³ but let’s look at a short outline.

It is assumed that children were present during the great Jewish celebrations and in the early Church, even if they aren’t mentioned specifically. ‘Households’ must have held children as well as adults. Baptism must have been done for children as well as adults as households came to believe. Children must have listened to the stories about Jesus and to Paul’s letters alongside the adults. We are tempted to say, ‘They “behaved” in church in the old days. Why shouldn’t they now? Why make any special provision for them? Let them “behave” just as adults “behave”.’

Well, perhaps that’s the difference: how *did* the adults behave? What if they didn’t sit in rows with their heads down but bubbled with zeal, excitement and a determination to hear the latest letter from Paul, to see the latest miraculous healing? What if children were learning to be Christians in the face of daily persecution and oppression, hearing stories of people they knew standing up for their faith and changing the face of the world? What if they were praying for Stephen’s widow to have enough bread to eat that week? What if they had had to hide from Roman soldiers on their way to meet with the rest of the church? There wouldn’t be any incentive

to ‘misbehave’: it would be far less interesting than what was going on around them. The faith of the adults would be a model for the faith of the children and vice versa, as new Christians joined the churches and watched what went on in them.

Perhaps, too, the children’s world was far less segregated from the adults’ world than it is now. They would ‘belong’ to a community of older people in their extended family and friends—all of whom would know them by name—and would be responsible to that community for their behaviour. If the people in the room with you are your aunts, grandfather and cousins, who know what your mum expects of you even if she’s not there, you’re probably going to think twice about messing about. In the suburban sprawl where I live, when graffiti is scrawled on the cricket pavilion no one has any idea who did it. In the small village I used to live in, the field of suspects was limited to two.

The Bible gives us a glorious picture of God’s idea of a perfect world, an ideal to live up to in our churches: ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there”’ (Zechariah 8:4–5). It is diverse and harmonious and celebrates every age group doing what they do best under the caring, watchful eye of the others.

Ah, but that’s too tidy, we groan. I’ve got to be part of a church that exists now, here on earth in the 21st century. We’ve got too many messy, unfinished component parts for it ever to operate like that biblical ideal from long ago—or that wonderfully serene icon of the Trinity you were talking about. And our whole attitude to children, as well as to older

generations, has changed dramatically; our children have very different rights, responsibilities and expectations from those of first-century, let alone Old Testament, children. We have different expectations, different needs, different wants... how can we reach for the stars when every time we try, someone pokes us in the armpit?

So let's look honestly at the problems of leading a church service that tries to do things together wherever possible—an 'all-age service', as it's commonly known. Let's take the biblical principle that God created us to live and worship in diverse communities and see how that works in churches—especially, for the purposes of this book, in church services—today. To begin with, can we acknowledge right from the start that people join, belong to and leave a church for the most irrational, unpredictable and complicated reasons? We're never going to get it completely right for everybody and, even if we moved mountains and calmed stormy seas, some people would take umbrage. I expect that while everyone else was busy partying at the wedding at Cana, the ancestors of such fault-finders were moaning about the quality of the wine glasses.

Starting from scratch

Many new forms of church are springing up alongside traditional church at the moment, encouraged in some denominations by the Fresh Expressions movement. There is an opportunity today, as never before, to rethink what really matters in church and to put it into practice. We have a freedom and permission to be bold that has hardly ever been seen in the UK church before. No one will be burned at

the stake for worshipping in the way that they feel called to.

One of the dangers of fresh expressions of church is that, being designed around the needs of a particular group in society, they can tend towards the homogeneous: for example, a church for moped riders, a church for young executives, a church for Goths. While this is an admirable and effective evangelistic strategy, it soon becomes clear that a church with only one sort of person in it is necessarily one-dimensional. As we've wondered before, how can we appreciate what it's like to enter the kingdom of heaven as a child if we never encounter any children? How can we look forward with confidence to a useful old age if we never meet any of the inspirational saints in their 80s who still serve God cheerfully? A colleague from the Intergenerational Forum said at a recent meeting, 'When I was a parent I needed other parents to show me how to bring up my children; now I'm older I need people to model to me how to die!' He was very serious and very joyful about it.

There is also an obvious problem with a church that is set up for and by a particular group of people: if it has any longevity at all, these people's situations will change so that they no longer 'fit' in that type of church. For example, young single people's circumstances can change dramatically in a very short period. Will they feel the need to leave their student-based fellowship so that they can belong to one that welcomes their baby, or their disabled parent who has come to stay indefinitely?

Yes, the glory of belonging to a wider church rather than just the local one is that we have the ability to move to a congregation that suits our needs and wants at a given time. However, one question that should be considered at the planning stage of any fresh expression of church is how best

to reflect God by building in at least the potential to welcome all ages, even if a child / teenager / person in their 20s / elderly person seems the least likely member at the stage we are at now.

Inherited models of worship

In a traditional church, it is often considered desirable to 'lose' the children as quickly as possible in the course of a service. Fresh expressions of church provide a chance to dispense with some traditional church baggage, which might include the habit of sending children away to learn and worship separately. It is very encouraging to hear stories of churches that are making a positive effort to worship together as an all-age family, and some of these stories are included in this book. More can be found on www.freshexpressions.org.uk. Other churches, though, feel stuck with a model that they have inherited, where the children and adults expect the children to leave and are disappointed when they don't. This is much harder to deal with than a new congregation where everything is up for grabs.

Margaret Withers argues in an article on the BRF *Barnabas* website:

Some churches have decided that every service should have children and adults together. This is fine, but one has to remember to feed and challenge the regular and informed worshippers as well as including the youngest and least formed. A more common practice is to have an all-age service once a month. Nearly every church has occasional services that are geared towards families and the fringe: Christingle, Crib service, Mothering Sunday, Harvest or

*Pentecost. These are usually the best-attended services of the year, so it is worth taking time to prepare them carefully so that everyone can actively take part.*⁴

Margaret highlights here the fear that many have about all-age worship, namely that the more established worshippers lose out because everything is (to put it crudely) dumbed down to the lowest common denominator. This takes us back to the question: where should the real *learning* go on? Is the church service the main occasion for church members to do their learning, or should it happen elsewhere? And, if done sensitively and intelligently, couldn't an all-age service open up possibilities for worship, learning, wonder, fellowship and meeting God to happen during the rest of the week, rather than being the only occasion when we expect any of these things to take place? Again, these possibilities are so much easier to manage if expectations have not already been set by generations of learned segregation. It is also worth asking: if all-age worship means 'dumbed down' worship, is it OK for that to happen even once a month? I wouldn't want a substandard service once a month. Surely it is possible to have a regular service that challenges and feeds everybody all together?

There is definitely a valid argument that organising good all-age worship is so time-consuming that many ministers or worship leaders would find it impossible to hold such a service more than once a month, once a term or once a year. The permitted liturgies of the different denominations are provided in order to make a minister's job manageable, to give a benchmark for quality and to remove the onus of reinventing the wheel every week. In many denominations, though, the traditional liturgies have been designed on the assumption

that the congregation will be an adult, literate, ‘well-behaved’ one. New liturgies are being provided, new flexibility is coming into play and some liturgies are indeed for all-age congregations, which are all moves to be welcomed; but the fact remains that to put on a localised, well-prepared, meaningful and imaginative service at which all sorts of different people are present is a very tough call. For many church leaders, it involves some hard thinking as they deliberately let go of leadership habits acquired over the years. A church which is asking this of its leadership team must be prepared to make allowances for the extra time and creative space that this style of worship needs. The members must also be ready to volunteer many more of their own gifts to be used in the church community, both to free the ministers’ time for preparation and to enrich the gathered worship with more diverse elements than those to which the ministers personally have access. In other words, all-age worship is costly.

Who is it all for?

We come back to the fundamental question: what are we trying to do in worship? What is it all for? Is it an ordeal to get through as painlessly as possible? Is it meant to cater for the wants of the most vociferous congregation members or of those who pay the bills? For some churches, considering the demands of all-age worship will mean an honest, soul-searching process about who it’s really for.

It’s a shame, in some ways, that the Gospels were written by men, with the perspectives of their era so firmly in place. We’ve seen how children were much more integrated into adult society than they are in our culture, but I would love

to know just what role women and children—the nobodies of Jesus' time—played in Jesus' ministry alongside the men, instead of having mere tantalising glimpses of his attitude to them. The twelve male disciples are clearly named, but few of the female followers of Jesus are named, and none of the children, even when they play a key role, such as providing food as the basis for a miracle. So we have a perception that the twelve disciples were the key players and everyone else had walk-on parts, but was that really the case or does it reflect the attitudes of the writers, who simply disregarded anyone without a beard? The classic case is indeed the feeding of the five thousand as described in Luke 9:14, where the number of people present was reckoned by the number of men, as if the women and children didn't even count as statistics.

Yet, when we consider crucial stories like that of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38–42, where Mary is praised for taking a traditional man's role in listening to the rabbi, rather than the traditional woman's role of disappearing among the cooking pots, it's obvious that Jesus must have encouraged the 'nobodies' to play a huge role in his work. He was for ever moving out to the people on the fringes rather than concentrating solely on those at the religious centre. In fact, he evidently found it easier to demonstrate kingdom values outside the synagogues, the religious structures of the day. There's a very telling challenge to his disciples in Matthew's account of the feeding of the five thousand, which takes place in the wilderness of a 'solitary place'. Jesus didn't encourage the disciples to send the hungry crowds to a professional centre of nourishment but said instead, 'They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat' (14:16). People don't need to 'go away' to find Jesus' blessing; Christians don't need to drag friends into church buildings. Jesus

challenges us to be spontaneous and offer others his blessing right where they are.

Jesus was criticised for spending all his time with the people everyone else despised: he longed for outsiders to be given a better place at the table. His attitude says a great deal about the church's relationship to people outside the church, but it also says much about the way we relate to each other inside the church: no one is to be excluded by reason of their birth, nationality, age or gender. Those people who appear to have the least to say must be listened to with special care. The people who behave inappropriately (shouting for Jesus' attention, climbing into undignified positions up trees, bothering him when he's tired, messing him up with oil) have something to demonstrate to the rest of us well-behaved, appropriate, conventional, good, religious people—something that goes beyond the ritual and ceremony so often associated with 'religiousness'. If we exclude and ignore our 'difficult' people, we miss learning what healing, forgiveness, new life and grace are all about. When we are trying to answer the question, 'Who is it all for?', we have to say 'Everybody,' not just 'People like us'.

Jesus didn't put children on a pedestal but he did bring one of them into the middle of the crowd of people to be presented as a model for discipleship (Matthew 18:1–4). In recent years, scholars have begun to take this model seriously rather than treating it as a pat way of saying that we need to be humble. If we don't have children in the midst of us, it makes it very difficult to realise the unsentimental, shocking nature of what Jesus offered to his disciples as a way of entering the kingdom of heaven. What does it mean to 'change and become like little children' (v. 3)? Can he really mean we have to be as vulnerable as that toddler trustingly walking off with

the churchwardens? Can he mean we must learn to be as spontaneous and undignified as the four-year-olds dancing along to ‘Thine be the glory’? Do we have to relearn how to insist unashamedly on getting as close to the action as we can so that we don’t miss out on anything? *Can* we be as powerless, as totally dependent as the baby being held in her father’s arms? If we don’t have children simply being themselves in the midst of us, we are missing out, not only on our own developing discipleship as church members but on the whole purpose of the Church. As Mountstephen and Martin write: ‘Our contention is that the church of all ages is the clearest way to embody kingdom values of welcome and reconciliation in order that the whole world might be saved.’⁵

Here’s an illustration of the way the journey towards all-age worship may not be a straightforward one.

St Mary’s, Greenham, Young Children’s Service

St Mary’s, Greenham is a medium-sized charismatic Anglican church on the edge of Newbury. Until five years ago, baptism couples were encouraged to attend the monthly ‘Family Focus’ all-age service, but John Clarke, the vicar, found that the couples didn’t feel at ease in the service. It lasted about an hour and had quite a number of praise and worship songs, which were the regular fare of the morning congregation. It was difficult for service leaders to include preschool children effectively in an all-age service.

Inspired by reports of services elsewhere concentrating on younger children, John and his wife decided to experiment

with a 25-minute service at 11.45am after the Family Focus. This was very 'hands-on', with puppets, activities and simple songs. Some of the congregation found it strange to split the family service, but the baptism couples unquestionably preferred the shorter service. Numbers have built up to about 20 on a good Sunday, and some continue coming even after moving a considerable distance away, as there is nothing similar nearby.

However, it has not been easy to integrate the parents into the main 10.30 service, and the split service can cause difficulty for families with children of different ages. Currently, John is wondering about the possibility of holding the young children's service at the same time as the main Family Focus, but more prayer and discussion are needed about this.

- How is this situation similar to your own?
- What would you advise John to do?

Conclusion

Churches have a very high calling and an impossible job in human terms. What they have to do is so unreasonable and demands so much sacrifice of things that are precious to us that it's a wonder anyone chooses to belong to a church at all! It's like being in a family: sometimes the demands made by older or younger generations are overwhelming. Wouldn't it be easier to divorce ourselves from the lot of them and hermetically seal ourselves off from any further contact with them?

As Sue Palmer writes in *Toxic Childhood*, however, 'That is what forging families is all about: adults putting themselves

out so children's developmental needs are met.'⁶ This challenges a church community as well as a nuclear family unit. Our 'adults' aren't necessarily our over-18s but rather our established congregation. If we, through the Holy Spirit, are as committed to each other as members of a family are through ties of dependency, then we will put the needs of the weaker members of our churches before our own needs. If we are truly committed to growing disciples and ensuring that everyone God sends to our community has the best possible chance to develop as a Christian, the people with the power need to be prepared to 'put themselves out' and make sacrifices in order to meet the needs of the more vulnerable and disempowered. The peculiar supernatural topsy-turvy reverse also applies here, because unless we can learn from the weak, the vulnerable, the ridiculous, the undignified, the challenging, the infuriating, the loving, the demanding and the trusting among us, we 'will never enter the kingdom of heaven'. We need each other.

An all-age church reflects the very nature of a diverse yet unified God. It demonstrates the integration of generations to which society as a whole can aspire, thus challenging the worldview that splits off the generations from each other in fear and hostility. It is the way that Christians have celebrated their faith for centuries. It is the best way of growing disciples.