Pass-over, morsel, or the real meal deal?
Seeking a place at the table for the church's children

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Every so often our church periodicals publish articles favouring the inclusion of children in celebrating communion. For some congregations, the idea of involving children is offensive and seems inappropriate, for theological reasons and because of tradition. In other congregations, leaders are looking for ways to involve children but do not know what are theologically correct practices. People want to know how other congregations deal with the "problem" of children and communion.

When debated, this issue can become emotionally charged and create havoc in a congregation. One congregation suspended its communion services for an extended time because its members could not agree on children's participation. Even after a careful study process, they did not resolve the matter. As times change and denominational lines become more blurred, Mennonite congregations are being forced to reflect on the theology and the practice of communion.

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Is there a place for unbaptized children at the Lord's table? According to normative Mennonite theology, in our written confessional statements, the answer is "no." Only baptized believers are invited to the table, and we do not baptize children. However, present practice reveals that children are participating in communion to varying degrees.

Present practices

A few years ago, I conducted a limited survey among General Conference Mennonite leaders on communion practices in their

congregations. The 35 responses, along with informal conversations with pastors and church leaders, helped me identify five ways congregations deal with the involvement of children in communion services.

Total exclusion. Children are not present for the communion service. In some cases, the service is planned for a Sunday evening and children stay at home; in others, children are sent out of the sanctuary during communion, for children's church or to practice singing. This is closed communion. One pastor, who was beginning to think that children could not be present during the communion service without feeling rejected because they cannot take part, wrote: "After all, it is an adult or believers meeting."

Participation by observation. When servers distribute the elements, the bread and juice are passed over or around the children. Children do not take part except by being present in the service. Sometimes someone gives them an explanation beforehand about the meaning of communion and about what they can anticipate when they are older.

Partial participation. Children receive something: a blessing, a cracker, a grape. One congregation assembles the children at the front of the church while the elements are being distributed to the baptized adults. Leaders give each child a blessing and a cracker. In other congregations, children come forward with family members and receive a blessing and a grape. Another church invites all to the communion table to share the bread, but they reserve the cup for those who are baptized. Sometimes children are given leftover bread after the service.

Participation by special invitation. Children are invited to participate because the theme and mood of communion allow for it. For example, in one church children can join fully in a Maundy Thursday service where bread and grapes or juice are freely shared. They can be full participants in love feasts or agape meals. One congregation included the children in a festive communion service with breads and sparkling grape juice that celebrated the coming fulfillment of Christ's reign.[1] Usually children are excluded from the Good Friday communion service because of its somber mood of remembrance of Jesus' suffering and death.

Full inclusion. Finally, some congregations invite children's full participation. Here the decision about children coming to the

table has been left to them and/or their parents. One congregation bases participation on "desire and relationship to Jesus Christ," which is determined solely by the individual, regardless of age.

When I asked on the survey, "Can children and youth, who have been baptized as infants in another denomination and now are part of your congregation, participate in the communion service?," I got mixed responses: Some leaders placed no restrictions on baptized children taking communion; others treated them like unbaptized children and excluded them. Some had not thought about the issue and had set no policy; still others said it was up to the parents or child to decide. One leader commented, "This isn't a written or spoken issue. My sense is that parents usually 'read' the setting and advise their children about what to do. We don't have anyone keeping track (at least not openly)!"

Although the practice of excluding children from communion likely has theological underpinnings, we often understand it more as a cultural norm of the congregation.

What do we do when a tension exists between our congregation's practices and the church's normative theology? I can think of at least three possibilities. First, we can hold fast to "right" theology, to the teachings of the church that have served us reasonably well for five centuries. Second, we can articulate a theology that fits our present practices in order to give them theological legitimacy. Third, we can entertain the notion that it may be time for another radical reformation, in which the Mennonite church reformulates a theology of communion that is more inclusive of children. We would be forced again to defend an unpopular position in direct opposition to both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies, which insist that communion is for only the baptized. As in our Anabaptist beginnings, we could easily become embroiled in a heated controversy with voiceless children at its centre.

Factors that influence our decisions

Several key factors affect how a congregation thinks about its children and their place in the church community. I name a few that have an impact on how we treat our children during the communion service.

Culture. Mennonites are living in a new sociological reality that has changed tremendously over the last several generations. A sense of community and belonging no longer comes from living and working side by side during the week and gathering together for worship on Sunday. Yet in our mobile society, Mennonite Christians still value and seek that sense of community. Gerald Gerbrandt observes that some congregations grasp at communion as one way of letting children know that God loves them and they belong within a faith community.[2] By inviting children to participate in the Lord's Supper, we give them a strong message of belonging to God's household of faith. One must ask if this is reason enough to include children at the table. Are there not other ways to show our children that they have a secure, loving place in our midst?

If tradition is our measuring stick, let's base our decisions about children's participation in communion on traditions that are Christian, not cultural.

Tradition. The role of tradition also factors into the debate about children. I suspect that most often it is cultural tradition that governs whether children are included. One older person was upset when she witnessed children taking communion because "it just didn't look right." Although the practice of excluding children likely has theological underpinnings, we often understand it more as a cultural norm of the congregation. When an eight-year-old child asks, "Why can't I have bread and juice? I love Jesus and want to follow him," how do we respond theologically? It is not enough to tell her, "We've never included children and that's just the way it is." For a practice to remain meaningful, each generation of believers must own and embrace it theologically. If tradition is our measuring stick, let's base our decisions about children's participation in communion on traditions that are Christian, not cultural.

Decision-makers. A third factor that influences how we treat children in communion has to do with those in power. Who decides? When children participate, the decision is often left to parents or the children themselves. What message are church leaders giving when they allow individuals to decide, or insist that they do? On what basis should an individual make that decision? Without careful teaching and congregational process, such

decisions may be based simply on whether the child is hungry that day. This practice tends to minimize the sacramental or symbolic meanings of communion for children and adults. Sometimes the minister determines whether children are in or out. Then the congregation must adapt to the particular theology of its leader, and communion practices vary as leaders come and go. Giving sole responsibility to an individual—parent, child, or minister—undermines corporate decision-making around an important communal faith issue.

Theology. How does theology factor into our attempts to include children? Take, for example, the increasingly common practice of distributing a cracker or a grape to the children during communion. Article 12 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* ([Scottdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 1995], 51) suggests that the bread and cup are "signs" that represent Christ's body, the new covenant, and unity among believers. If such ordinary food as bread and the juice are signs that point to a communal, covenantal relationship with God, what do the grape and cracker represent or point toward? Do we have a theology of the grape or cracker? If not, should we identify and articulate such a theology so children can participate at least in a limited way in our communion practices?

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In our theology, communion is a sacred act that expresses our relationship with God and each other. How communion is enacted and with whom can be contentious issues. If this "sacrament" is to provide meaning for our life together in this place and time, congregations will do well to risk examining closely the way we celebrate communion. "What is strong will be stronger for being examined. What is less important may be altered to create better coherence or communication."[3] As practices change with each generation of Mennonite Christians, the shape we give them should be a result of careful theological reflection.[4] To begin the conversation I offer some tentative thoughts on finding a theological basis for welcoming children at the Lord's table.

Toward a theology of the open table

To advocate welcoming and including children at the Lord's table is to call for radical inclusiveness that has the potential to transform both our theology and our practice of communion. As we try to figure out what a "transformed" Mennonite Church looks like, perhaps we need to embrace a transformed Mennonite theology that gives children a legitimate place at the Lord's table. Is now the time to articulate a theology of children that pays attention to children's spirituality and re-examines some of our traditional theological assumptions about children?

What the Bible tells us. Like our Anabaptist faith-parents, we turn to the Scriptures as our guidebook for living faithfully as God's people. What do the Scriptures tell us about children and communion when we scrutinize them from the lens of twenty-first century Christian faith? We will find that it is difficult to justify including children in communion or excluding children from communion on the basis of Scripture alone. Church tradition, not biblical tradition, has denied children a place at the Lord's table.

In the Hebrew community, children were an integral part of religious life. They were present at the festivals and feast days. They participated in the Passover meal, asking the key questions that led to the ritual story-telling and sharing of food. We will not find a warrant for excluding children from the Lord's Supper in its connection with the celebration of Passover.

In the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, we know that Jesus gathered with his disciples for the Passover meal. People assume that no children were present at this supper, and that therefore children do not belong at communion services. When we read about Jesus' interactions with children, we learn that his attitude toward them, and toward other members of society with no status and no voice, was so radical that even the disciples could not grasp it. Hans-Ruedi Weber has suggested that the way Jesus spoke to children and sought physical contact with them far surpassed what was expected, and exemplified the gift of God's unreasonable love.[5] For Weber, this is the heart of the gospel. Can we, like Jesus, practice a radical inclusiveness that welcomes and invites children to come to the table to encounter the God who offers unreasonable love to all God's children, regardless of age? As Mennonites, we have taken seriously both the words and life of

Jesus as a model for our daily living. Are we to take seriously his instruction to welcome the child as a sign of welcoming him (see Mark 9:36–37)?

The nature of children. How we understand the nature of children affects how we view them theologically. Texts such as Genesis 1 and Psalm 139 suggest that humanity right from birth is God's good creation, and that God desires a loving relationship with humanity.[6] Jesus demonstrated an exceptional love for children. Against the writings of Augustine and against their Roman Catholic and Protestant contemporaries, early Anabaptists argued that children are created in innocence, and do not enter the world as depraved sinners in immediate need of redemption through baptism.[7]

Religious educators who work with children are convinced that children come into the world already in relationship with their Creator God. When we pay close attention to our children, we get a glimpse of a joyful, trusting, and mystical relationship they have with One for whom they may not even have a name. Sofia Cavalletti suggests that the plea of the young child is "Help me to come closer to God by myself."[8] In our child dedication services, parents promise to nurture the relationship that is already there and bring the child into a covenantal relationship with the church community. Believers baptism is not the beginning of the journey with God, but an emphatic "yes" that takes personal ownership in the relationship with God that began even before birth; it is also a willing accountability with a specific faith community.

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The question of membership. Mennonite theology binds together believers baptism, church membership, and participation in the Lord's Supper. This linkage is a Christian tradition, not a biblical one. Is it possible for us to imagine a theology that allows for a covenantal membership assumed in the child dedication or consecration service, and an adult baptismal membership that comes with baptism? As a privilege of covenantal membership children would participate in congregational life as they are able

and would be fully or partially included in our communion services.

Whose table is it, anyway? Our Anabaptist fore-parents insisted on closed communion: only the baptized (adult) believers could partake and then only after careful examination by self and community. People who did not practice right living were excommunicated; they were refused a place at the table. Participation in communion was a measure of one's faithfulness to God and the church. Five centuries later, many congregations have relaxed their hold on who participates and who is refused communion. Most often, participation is a personal or individual decision, except when it comes to the children.

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I'd like to think that it is God who invites us to commune together at God's table. This is a banquet table at which all can feast, all who love Jesus and try to follow him. By participating in communion, we are accepting Jesus' gift of new, resurrected living that nourishes us as we re-enact the story of God's unreasonable love. The bread is a sign that we accept God's sustenance and are willing to live in community with others; the cup is a sign of God's covenant of new life in God's realm. When communion symbolizes our eschatalogical hope, our living in the "already but not yet," we can invite children to participate in God's banquet of covenant and promise.

Head or heart theology. We Mennonites have a tendency to worship primarily with our heads. We like to explain and rationalize our faith rather than experience it. We seem reluctant to use all our senses—seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, and feeling—to experience God in worship. Our practices of communion have strongly encouraged us to *think about* our relationships with God and each other and make sure we are in "right relationship" on both counts. I am rarely invited to encounter God as mystery, or to feel the awe of being invited to join God at God's table in celebration and joy! Perhaps this is what children can teach us: to enjoy God, to revel in the mystery

of the bread and cup, to be in awe of God's divine yet intimate presence and to willingly receive God's unreasonable love and grace.

I believe that communion liturgy is meant to engage us at the heart level in a way that reminds us of whose we are, of how we are loved and celebrated by God. The table has been prepared for all God's children, regardless of age. It is a place where all are invited to "come with joy to meet our Lord." Our communion practices can welcome children as spiritual beings who are capable of significant encounters with the Holy One. If we pay attention, our children can even teach us how to worship and feast with God.

Educating for change

For congregations that want to include children in their communion practices at one or more levels, a careful process of education is needed. What follows is one possible approach to theological reflection at the congregational level.[9]

1. Engage the entire congregation in the conversation right from the beginning. Invite all ages to share their childhood experiences of communion. Note similarities and differences, themes and moods that dominated communion services, emotions that surface in these memories. Talk about what has changed over the years, and how people have experienced that change.
2. Consider the traditions or habits of your congregation regarding children's participation. How did the present practice evolve? Who made the decisions? What is the theology of your practices? How do you feel about present communion practices?
3. Study the various meanings of communion, its themes, biblical bases, and the Christian tradition. Eleanor Kreider has written an excellent chapter on the debate about children.[10] This resource gives ample food for thought and reflection.
4. Integrate what you heard in the previous sessions. How do past experience, present practice, the Christian tradition, the Mennonite tradition, and other factors fit together? Pose questions such as, "What are you thinking now about children

and communion?" "What further thinking or reflection is needed so we can practice communion with theological integrity?"

5. Act. What are the options? How will the decisions regarding children be made? How will you educate the congregation?

Here are a few ways to work at it: Find creative ways to teach children and parents about the meanings and practices of communion. What are their questions? What is it important for them to know? In my experience, many children and their parents have little understanding of the practices and meaning of communion beyond "This is the way we do it here." They deserve more.

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Prepare a booklet, share and/or read communion stories, visit other churches, and share observations and reflections.

Vary your communion practices to help people of all ages experience God and each other in surprising and mysterious ways.

Reflect together on these experiments. Engage the entire congregation in the process of decision-making. Prepare a statement of your theology of communion, including the role of the children, for newcomers.

Keep the lines of communication open at all times. Take time to listen to people's anxieties. Invite the children to share their insights.

A plea for radical inclusiveness

Eleanor Kreider writes that advocates for an open invitation to God's table, including English Baptist pastor Michael Forster, believe that "radical inclusiveness...should be the hallmark of the Christian community. The church's table is the proper place to act out that inclusiveness. This position calls for an abrupt break in church tradition. Forster believes that a positive function of tradition is to put the brakes on change until issues have been fully explored. But when church traditions counter the Spirit of Jesus and the gospel, then, Forster insists, they must no longer be allowed to be obstacles to change."[11]

Is the Spirit of Jesus inviting the Mennonite church to participate in another radical reformation that practices radical inclusiveness at the Lord's table of all God's children, regardless of age? I think so. How about you?

Notes

[1] For a detailed description of this festive communion service, refer to *Hymnal Subscription Series* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1999), 1:23–5.
[2] See Gerald Gerbrandt, "Church Membership, Circumcision, and Children," in *Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership* (Winnipeg: Resources Commission, Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997), 67.
[3] Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1997), 151.
[4] Gerbrandt, "Church Membership," 65, refers to a careful process his congregation used to decide to limit communion to the baptized.
[5] Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children: Biblical Resources for Study and Preaching* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979), 19.
[6] Pivotal biblical texts that refer to children's relationship with God are examined in Eleanor Snyder, "Including Children in the Life of the Congregation: A Contemporary Mennonite Exploration" (D.Min. thesis, Toronto School of Theology, 1999), chapter 5.
[7] Apparently, Anabaptists were accused of Pelagianism because they disputed Augustine's views on original sin. Pelagius, a contemporary of Augustine, believed in the essential goodness of humanity. The theological debate over the essential nature of humanity has continued throughout the centuries. J. Philip Newell, a Celtic Christian scholar, suggests that we take a serious look at how Pelagius's theology might inform our thinking today (*Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* [New York: Paulist Pr., 1997], 8–22).
[8] Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children,* trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Pubns., 1992), 45.
[9] This outline is based on Thomas H. Groome's "shared praxis" approach to religious education. See Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* ([San Francisco]: Harper San Francisco, 1991).
[10] See "An Open Table?" chap. 14 in *Communion Shapes Character*.
[11] Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character,* 177.