

All Age Easter Experience

Baptist Tabernacle – Lyndon Drake

I wonder if you've ever been to an all-age church event with resignation in your heart? I certainly have, because most all-age church services I've been to are really services for the youngest children, not for the whole people of God together. They often feature children performing, special honour being given to parents of children, or infantile talks. For many years I've been able to persist in simply feeling cynical about all-age services. Then I became a pastor, and realised that instead of being cynical I should have a go at doing a genuine all-age event!

Over Easter this year, we put together three different services over Easter weekend, all with a deliberate focus on communicating with and involving people from across the range of age groups and life situations in our church. Some of what we tried seemed to work well, in two of the services in particular, and might be useful in provoking more conversation and development in our family of churches. None of the ideas are mine, although we customised each of them for our own setting, and I am especially indebted to the Baptist Union Children and Families team for their advice and help.

First, we held a Tenebrae service on the Thursday evening. One of the team helping me found a service designed to work in the evening. The service centres around a reading of the crucifixion account in Mark's Gospel by different participants in the service. To support the reading, candles are lit at the start, and gradually extinguished as the story grows darker, until as Jesus dies the room is plunged into complete darkness.

For this simple service, we sat around tables with 7-8 people in each group. Before the liturgical part of the service began, we shared a normal evening meal together. Each table had its own set of candles, with each table extinguishing one of their candles as each reading segment finished. The participants who were going to read had been pre-assigned and given a script. Many (not all) of the tables included children, some with their own parents but in every case a mix of people from different family & friendship groups.

I wasn't at all sure how this was going to work out, as the service offered no "entertainment" or even explanation of the story. But what was

fascinating was that the candles were sufficient to hold the attention of everyone, including all the children. We sat enthralled as the story progressed, gripped by the unadorned but compelling words of Mark's Gospel—gripped by God speaking to us in the the beauty and majesty of his word, without our own words intruding.

The moment when the last candle was extinguished was deeply moving to me, even though I'd prepared the service. And as the service finished, with one candle relit to hint at the resurrection, we left in silence, thinking of what it cost our saviour to save us.

The next morning, on Good Friday, we met for a more typical church service. At the Tabernacle we have a beautiful old pipe organ, and on holiday weekends I sometimes skip the effort of trying to put together an entire worship team (a fruitless exercise when everyone leaves Auckland for the bach!) and we have a more traditional service with the organ. As this leaves the stage empty, we had a chance to get everyone up the front to participate.

To offer a way of collectively reflecting on the death of Jesus, we set up a cross in the middle of the stage, and had a couple of big buckets of red paint (water-based, of course). Everyone was invited to come forward, dip their hands in the paint, and use their red hands to mark the cross.

Alongside this, we gave out bitter sweets, mirroring the Passover meal idea of bitter herbs. This was a chance for us to all share in the bitterness of Jesus' death.

At the end of this point in the service, everyone, young and old, had left their mark on the cross, had come away with hands washed clean, and experienced a shared taste of the bitterness of death. The cross stayed in the middle of the stage, a visible reminder that all of us together, young and old, shared in the sin that Jesus died for, and that all of us together, young and old, had been set free from sin's guilt, condemnation, and power by that first Good Friday.

As we did this, the old hymn, "Beneath the cross of Jesus," was played:

Upon that cross of Jesus
My eye at times can see

The very dying form of One
Who suffered there for me;
And from my stricken heart with tears
Two wonders I confess;
The wonders of redeeming love
And my unworthiness.

For Easter Sunday, we decorated the auditorium with flowers and balloons, gave out chocolate eggs to the children—a counterpoint to the bitter sweets of Good Friday, a celebration of the sweetness of the resurrection, and a foretaste of the celebration which Jesus will bring when he returns. And we gave each child there, and quite a few adults, a small flower potplant, to take away and see the beauty of new life growing. While this service was enjoyable, I'm still looking for something to bring us together meaningfully—I felt that what I'd put together was more individually focussed than the other two.

Three things will stick with me from that weekend. One was the sense of solidarity that these events gave us. In a world dominated by individualism, it was moving to be engaged in acts of collective worship and reflection. The second was the discovery, no doubt made by many others before me, that liturgy is effective at enabling children and adults to worship and learn from God together. The modern evangelical church has often segregated children, but I wonder if we could learn something from liturgical movements, and worship as a whole church community more.

The third thing I will take away is a renewed commitment to the public reading of scripture to people of all ages. Of course, this will be nothing new to people from a more liturgical church background, where reading the unadorned Bible is often a major part of a church service. But to me this was a fresh experience of the power of God's word, in the form he has given to us. God's word truly is "living and active," and doesn't need me to add to it or take away from it. God truly does speak through scripture, to all from the youngest to the oldest. We don't have to make it infantile, and I have come away from that weekend with a renewed confidence that God's Spirit is especially active in people's hearts when we trust that his word is beautiful, flawless, and perfect—just as it is.



