

Church Youth Groups – the building of the future. An English experience.

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Summary.

Playing is a child's way to get in touch with the world. Mentored by their parents and by the Church, children and youth can discover many Christian teachings through their play. The Christian Church is one of the institutions that have been involved for centuries in children's formal and informal education. Through this article we make a demonstration of how informal lessons in the church, through play, bear a very important role in children and youth inside Church development. The example of working with children and adolescents in Church Youth Groups is one which can transform the young people of the contemporary world. We start here from our experience inside a Church Youth Group in Mirfield, UK. This happened several years ago, when studying for a Master's degree in Theology and Pastoral Studies at The University of Leeds, UK. Different playing situations within a Youth Group build this part of the Church, and give young people a meaning, a place in the ecclesiastic community. But the most important is that, by playing, they can learn and understand easier God's commandments, God's way and even God Himself, as our Creator, Saviour and Protector. This is, therefore, an example to be followed also by our Church, even in national programmes.

Key words:

Youth Groups, children, adolescents, youth, Church.

*"Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."*²

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² Antoine de Saint Exupery, *The Little Prince*. Trans. Richard Howard. (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Press, 2000), p. 2;

The Church is one of the institutions that have been involved for centuries in children's formal education. Throughout the ages, education happened inside churches. Even the first schools were started or, at least, hosted by the Church. As *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states, the educational system started "from the medieval schools known as *studia generalia*; they were generally recognized places of study open to students from all parts of Europe. The earliest *studia* arose out of efforts to educate clerks and monks beyond the level of the cathedral and monastic schools."³ Printing machines, first books, first school manuals are also connected to the life of the Christian religious community. Therefore, when talking about formal education, Church is, or at least started as, the main host and engine for the educational process. Going further, the researcher can speak of an entire system of informal education which can be traced along centuries in the life of the religious community. Whether we talk about *Sunday schools*, or *Parish schools*, *Evangelical lessons*, and so forth, when the educational process started its own life, environment, and set of rules as *formal schooling system*, an informal one grew inside the Church. This came naturally as a ground for Moral studies, Moral Theology, Bible study, and any other subject related to the Church life and not necessarily a part of the formal education syllabus.

Are there any other ways of education through which children can be attracted to the Church? Are there earlier ages to start the education for children? For example, could children find God through playing? Is this form of expression, found somewhere between reality and imagination, able to help children in their search for God? A child's imaginary world makes it easier for him to cope with the idea of supernatural. Could they cope more easily with the idea of divinity, of somebody from the sky who protects his world? Is there playing an informal way of education that could make children more aware of the presence of God in their lives, and especially in Church? From a lay point of view, as described by the UNESCO, the early education of children started "during the seventeenth century", when "it was recognized for the first time by Europe that early years have a particular role in subsequent human development. The importance of first-hand experience, learning through play, impact of positive reinforcement and active learning during early childhood was expressed by many European philosophers and educators such as Czech Jan Amos Comenius, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Johann Pestalozzi."⁴ This *new education goal* went even further in the next hundreds of years, when "a German educator Frederick Froebel who believes in learning through play started a school for children and named it as 'Kindergarden'. The trend was continued by Maria Montessori who came with an

³ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 9 March 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/university>;

⁴ *History of Early Child Education*. 9 March 2020. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/access-by-year/2007/>;

additional idea of emphasizing individual over class teaching, where children are given liberty to follow self-chosen activities.”⁵

The noun ‘play’ is defined as “activity that is not serious but done for enjoyment, especially when children enjoy themselves with toys and games”⁶. Even from our own experience, we can say that playing was a very important part of our lives, but also a very important part of our formation. Defined as a ‘not serious’ activity, play is never understood like that by a child. When children play, they engage very seriously in what they do, and they seem to mean every word and action that play brings along. By playing, children often express feelings that are never noticed by adults.

In the ancient Greek theatre, the wearing of a mask gave the actor a totally new kind of freedom: the freedom of expression. In his role, the actor was a different person, who could say and do things that could not be expressed in ‘real life’; the same happens to a child when playing. A character in a theatre play is free to express his anger, his emotions, to laugh or to cry when it is needed, or when he feels like it. A ‘real’ human being is so often caught in a world where expressing feelings is taken not only as weakness, but also as renouncing self-defence, which can be very dangerous. Children find it easier to express their feelings in a way that adults do not always take seriously. It is easier to be an imaginary king and to rule over an imaginary kingdom, than to obey your mother’s commands. It is easier to show people around that you do not like them by acting like a cowboy who shoots Indians, or like a policeman killing villains.

Is God easier to reach by play? Although adults could consider play as frivolous, finding God *is* easier through play, just as by playing with a child, you can learn much more about him or her than through any other experience. A child’s world is a distortional world, because they often see things that adults will never notice, and insignificant things for adults are huge things for them. For a child, God can come and play with him or her without any problem – He only has to be asked.

Working with children and helping them to reach God by play is not a new idea. There is an entire Centre⁷ that deals with this, and their statement is: “The Centre’s vision is to create a positive, long-term approach to religion in the world by teaching the Christian religion to children in a way that deeply centres them and at the same time keeps them open to others and the future in creative ways.”⁸ But this paper is

⁵ *History of Early Child Education*. 9 March 2020. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/access-by-year/2007/>;

⁶ *Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary*. April 2003. Cambridge Dictionaries Online. 9 March 2020. <<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=60596&dict=CALD>>;

⁷ *Godly Play Wonder – The Centre for the Theology of Childhood*. January, 2005. Godly Play. 9 March 2020. <<http://www.godlyplay.org/view.php/page/about>>;

⁸ *Idem*;

more about adolescents (aged 10 to 16) in their search for God, than young children (under 10).

Working with a Youth Group⁹ can be a very powerful experience. This becomes even more difficult when thinking about playing games. “Some of the best youth ministry games are the ones where you need to ask for people who are okay with getting dirty, singing in front of people, or doing embarrassing skits. Youth workers love to do these games, but we must always remember that we are here for all of the students and not to exclude people at youth group.”¹⁰ Few years ago, during my MA studies in Britain, I was one of three leaders for this kind of Youth Group. Within such a group (organised by the Church) one can have many things to learn. We used play to make them aware that God is for them at the reach of a hand. Once, when we were playing, they were asked how we could find God in our lives. One of the children (aged 13) came with the idea that we should call Him. It would not be very hard, because we could use the letters from the expression ‘God Our Saviour’ to find the number on a mobile. Said and done: this way we found his phone-number. Through this game they learned that God can be closer than we think and that there are many ways of seeking and finding him. Talking with one of the leaders after the meeting, we agreed on how important it is for children to be given the chance to express themselves. She also noticed how they easily talk about God and how well they feel doing that. This is one aspect that adult life can make harder.

A different situation arose from another day among children, when we played a game that brought other interesting aspects of the childhood in attention. The game is called ‘*The Killer from Palermo*’ and is played in a circle, one of the children being ‘the killer’ who, every night (here everybody have their eyes closed, only the ‘killer’ is ‘awake’), selects another victim and the ‘citizens of Palermo’ (the other children and the leaders) have to find out who ‘the killer’ is and ‘hang’ him or her. Not only did this game bring the children together as a community, where the leaders emphasized that they were like a small church fighting against the evil, but also made the leaders realise that some of them were frustrated by their ‘leadership’. We were spectators of the fact that the children often thought that a leader is ‘the killer’, and one of the leaders was several times eliminated from the game – ‘hanged’. Commentating on this after the meeting with one of the leaders, she was very surprised about children’s wish to ‘hang’ her all the time. We realised that this game was very good for us – it made us

⁹ Few years ago, I had my parish placement during the MA in Britain with a Youth Group at St Mary Magdalene’s Church, in Mirfield. This group, organised once a week, on a Tuesday evening, of 10 to 15 children, tried to bring children of different backgrounds closer to the Church, closer to God;

¹⁰ Ben Read, *Great Youth Ministry Games: Everyone Plays Games*. 21 March 2020. <https://youthmin.org/2012/03/great-youth-ministry-games-everyone-plays-games/>;

aware that children are not very comfortable with us, they do not think about us as partners, but more as adults, who ‘just do not get it’. The borderline between playing, sarcasm, and truth is very thin when it comes about teenagers. Adults must thrive to become part of the *tribe* before the actual *educational part of the play*. How did we come closer to God through this? The answer is simple, we brought these children together, we made them play as a team, told them about the ‘small church’, and also made them aware that, through God’s justice, in the end the evil is defeated. In few words: we followed Jesus’ example. This is also an experienced youth minister’s advice: “Take heart; there is a method based in context and technique that works. Furthermore, this method comes directly from the man Himself. If we pay attention to the how and the dynamic that Jesus uses in His ministry with people, we can learn a great deal. In addition, the context that Jesus uses when He does His work is also informative to us modern day evangelists. Why reinvent the wheel? Why try to improve on what the Master does?”¹¹

We need to be aware of the fundamental differences between school and this kind of children’s group organised by the Church. School is compulsory, highly organised, professionally staffed; children generally accept that they must attend. But Church organised youth groups are voluntary, staffed by volunteers and many of the children come irregularly. Children “don’t accept that they have to attend, and their parents are often not interested in ensuring long-term commitment either for their children or (perhaps even more significantly) for themselves”¹². This is one of the difficulties when you enter children’s game: you must play by their rules. If in school you have your strict position as a teacher and you represent the authority, here you do not have any authority, and, as we have just seen, you are most likely to be the ‘bad guy’, the negative character. The most important thing with play, and also the most amazing, is that children do not really need adults to find God. But even though they do not need an adult authority, they could use some help in finding the right way. Adults can sometime alter their image about divinity and sometimes build it: a three years old child said once, “*God is very big, but not as big as my daddy!*”¹³ Is this a way of altering the divine image or of building it? It looks more like building it. We can see here how from this paternal basis the child will be able to understand better God’s image as our Father and ground his life on it.

But let us go back to play and its understandings. When defined in the Cambridge Dictionary, this word has something else added – *enjoy* – a term that

¹¹ *Youth Ministry Message Delivery*. 11 March 2020. <https://youthmin.org/2013/08/guest-post-youth-ministry-message-delivery/>;

¹² Church of England: General Synod, *Children in the way*, (London: National Society Church House Publishing, 1988), p. 29;

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 30;

makes us think a bit further. If playing means also *enjoying*, that leads us to another conclusion: if God is to be found by play, He should also be enjoyed. Not only that, but because children enjoy playing (unequivocal in this case), it will be easier for them to find somebody good to be enjoyed in the place of their joy. Here we should think about how we could make God enjoyable for them. A possible answer can be found in the book *Children in the Church*¹⁴, where the authors give us solutions for children services in the church:

“Rhyme for young children:

Jesus I am loved by you (hands crossed over chest)

The Bible tells me this is true (hands open side by side as if reading a book)

Help me turn away from wrong (turn from left to right)

Let me please you all day long (hands in the air)”¹⁵

Is not this also a kind of play? Is it not enjoyable? It clearly is, also it gives us a very good example of how to make things easier for children, and also how to draw them near. Something like this will definitely attract them. By enjoying their participation in the church, children will be anxious to come again, to come back and to learn some more. Various methods can be used with children, but none is more enjoyable for them than play. That may be because their world is centred on play, on games and toys, but also because they can be very serious when playing. They can ‘talk’ through play much easier and it is generally within their own family that they feel safe enough to express themselves. The family is the environment where children develop both physically and psychically. The main preoccupation of the Church should be to become a second family for children (even maybe a first family, because that should be the natural ‘link’: we all are God’s children first).

“In the last fifty years or so there have been significant changes in emphasis within evangelicalism towards the ‘family’ as the basic building block of the Church. In the evangelical mind church and family have become intimately interlinked.”¹⁶

Their *godly play*¹⁷ develops within this big family, which is the Church. The role of the family or of the ‘big family’, which is the Church, is more to provide “*warmth*,

¹⁴ Betty Pedley and John Muir, *Children in the Church?* (London: National Society Church House Publishing, 1997);

¹⁵ Betty Pedley and John Muir, *Children in the Church?* (London: National Society Church House Publishing, 1997), p. 78;

¹⁶ Pete Ward, *Growing up evangelical. Youth work and the making of a subculture*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), p. 143;

¹⁷ The expression comes from the term used by the Centre we talked about, and we will use it as defining the type of play related to God;

stability and aesthetic form” than to offer “*instruction in belief*”¹⁸, and even this kind of religious education has to happen with the young children, who “*may simply ‘be religious’*”¹⁹. It is easier to form a child than an adolescent, but if that education did not happen in the earlier years, an adolescent can also be fertile ground. Enabling children to feel safer, to feel at home in the church, they will build their new world around moral principles of the Church.

Working together as not only a small part of the big Church, but as a Church in itself, children and young people will feel their importance within the Body of Christ. Playing together will bring them closer to each other, but also will develop their ‘group’ sense, the feeling that they are not alone, that they are a whole. One of the most important roles here belongs to the leader, the youth worker. “As youth workers, I believe broadening the scope of the knowledge that we consume is essential. We church people have a tendency to become a little “ingrown” sometimes, both in the way we do things and in the way that we think. But by choosing to listen to new perspectives, deciding to learn new things, and being strategic about the knowledge that we consume... We can become better people. Better thinkers. Better problem-solvers. Better leaders of the next generation. Better innovators.”²⁰

Coming back to our Youth group, another occasion that brought them closer to each other, and also gave them a chance to play, was a money raise for ‘Children in Need’. Raising money for helping other children bound them together, built them as a force that could make a difference, and could ‘change the world’. This also made them realise that they were not alone, that the Church is much bigger and with endless problems, which can be resolved with our participation. Within the Body of Christ, a member can help another find its healing, its needed strength.

Children were always part of the Church, being called by Jesus Himself.

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to the, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”²¹ Jesus not only embraces children, but also blesses them as being a model to be

¹⁸ The National Society for Promoting Religious Education, *How Faith Grows*, (London: National Society/ Church House Publishing, 1991), p. 54;

¹⁹ The National Society for Promoting Religious Education, *How Faith Grows*, (London: National Society/ Church House Publishing, 1991), pp. 54-55;

²⁰ Elle Campbell, *Sparking innovation in youth ministry*. 21 March 2020. <https://youthmin.org/2013/08/guest-post-sparking-innovation-in-youth-ministry-by-elle-campbell/>;

²¹ Mark 10: 13-16; Luke 18: 15-17;

followed: "He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'"²²

We cannot imagine that children in that period were silent and peaceful, we cannot imagine any difference between a child's behaviour then and now (except, of course, for the changes that humankind has suffered since then). Even so, Jesus recommends them as the example to be followed, as the best solution for entering the kingdom of heaven. We can be sure that there were situations when, whilst playing, children bumped into the crowds gathered around our Saviour, when he was teaching. We can also be sure that they were curious to see what is happening there, where so many people gathered. We can even think that Jesus picked for his teaching about the kingdom of heaven one of the children playing around him and his disciples.

Did their 'endless play' bother him? No! Did their childish behaviour? Again, we say, no. But Christ's message for us is not to be 'childish'; his message is to be 'childlike'²³. He says, "*Whoever becomes humble like this child...*" – this is the real message, this is the resemblance to children. We must be humble, this humility opening for us the gates of heaven. Jesus was not disturbed by their playing, on the contrary, he may have picked up one of them when they were playing; he was not disturbed by their childish behaviour. How many times do we find ourselves acting in a childish way? How many times do we need to say to those around us, 'Grow up'? Even if he is not disturbed by this kind of behaviour, what he asks of us is to act like children in humility, in telling the truth, in listening to each other, not something else. The words, "*whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it*", do not mean that we need to be childish in our search for the Kingdom. As children look for new answers everyday and take each day as a new one, as nothing is boring for them, as every little thing has a huge meaning, the same should apply to our search for the Kingdom – one never boring, never meaningless, never sufficient and old.

However, the image of a childlike attitude needed for 'conquering' the kingdom of heaven is an empowering image, and there is no reason to believe that the kingdom of heaven is not a part of this 'serious play', which demands transposing ourselves in this new world of energy and awareness, in order to bring us closer to God. Going further than talking about all human beings, we come back to children and their play. In his 'serious play' a child walks, even not knowing (or, more often not knowing), on

²² Matthew 18: 2-5;

²³ To be like children in their innocence and endless search is what God wants from us and also how we define the word 'childlike', whereas 'childish' describes more the 'foolishness' and lack of experience that come with the age;

the way that leads to God. As an image of the Creator, the child creates a new world for himself and his real or imaginary friends. As an image of Christ, our Saviour, they can lose or redeem this world. Not least, as an image of the Holy Spirit, the *Paraklete*²⁴, children build and protect their worlds. What is more important than anything is that a child can reach, through play, God's love, the Trinitarian love for other human beings and for the surrounding – animal and vegetable – world.²⁵

As a world of its own, the world of childhood has its own 'language'.²⁶ We started this article by showing how for adults is very hard to understand children's world; children have to explain it over and over, and even then, they do not understand. Indeed, their world could seem simple, but it can be more complicated than ours. They understand everything by asking questions over and over; they cope with the new world that opens in front of them by playing with it, touching it, and asking it how it feels. Children's world is either good, or bad, it cannot be both. Children's world is about creating and seeking the benefits of this creation. Children's world is almost entirely about play, and always about godly play. Beckoned by their small family from at home – where they should find a parental pattern to build on – and by the bigger family, inside the Church, children can always play with God and can always feel God's presence beside them.

Jesus said that only the one who will confront this world with a child's mind is able to reach the kingdom of heaven. We should learn from our children how to 'play with God', how to challenge ourselves as much as possible during this 'lifelong game', which is faith.

What we must understand is that playing is a child's way to get in touch with the world. Mentored by their parents and by the Church, children can discover many Christian teachings through their play. But the most important is that, by playing, they can learn and understand easier God's commandments, God's way and even God Himself, as our Creator, Saviour and Protector.

²⁴ From Greek, translated as 'Comforter', 'Consoler' or 'Protector': *one called or sent to assist another; an advocate, one who pleads the cause of another*, 1 Jon. 2. 1; *genr. One present to render various beneficial service, and thus the Paraklete, whose influence and operation were to compensate for the departure of Christ himself*, in Harold K. Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 303;

²⁵ And we can find this very obvious in Antoine de Saint Exupery, *The Little Prince*. Trans. Richard Howard. (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Press, 2000);

²⁶ For example, the specific symbols and instructions that should be learned in order to handle a computer, or the different 'alphabet' for the drivers, these are only two examples of different 'languages'; "*So many 'languages' exist in addition to the obvious spoken word*", says Tony Castle in his book, *So much to celebrate. Living out the Church year in the family*, (Suffolk: Kevin Mayhew LTD, 2000), p. 81;