

## 17. The congregation with a heart for children

*Let the children come to me*

**Children are not the future of the church, they are part of the church of today. We baptise children and in some cases they are dedicated. We bring them into the circle of the congregation. And what happens then? Can they really be a part of the congregation?**

In his books about Christian faith education Wim ter Horst stresses the importance of the church as community. Do not leave parents to their own devices, cherish the children that are in your midst. Are they taken into account? And is there a welcome for children from outside the circle of the church as well? Jesus was angry when his disciples wanted to keep the children away from him!

*There was a congregation where a children's club was held on a weekly basis. They were told a bible story and then they did some artwork or drew a picture based on the story. There were also songs to ensure the children got to know the bible stories at their own level. Despite all this the leaders did not think that the club was a success. Only a few children from the church attended and there were also a few of their friends 'who only ever came to the club'. That point of view was not very missionary.*

*A small boy in Amsterdam grows up in a problem family. Then one of his friends takes him to the bible club, on the third floor at the back of the building. An elderly lady is standing at the top of the stairs and welcomes the children. "It is lovely to see you!" she says to the newcomer. It affects him deeply. 'And now I am a minister', he says years later.*

### **Keep telling the story**

The bible invites us to pass on the great stories about God to the next generations. A beautiful example of this can be found in Psalm 78, 1-4: *Listen, my people, to my teaching, and pay attention to what I say. I am going to use wise sayings and explain mysteries from the past, things we have heard and known, things that our ancestors told us. We will not keep them from our children; we will tell the next generation about the LORD's power and his great deeds and the wonderful things he has done.*

What strikes us is the up-beat tone. It is not problematic or difficult to pass on to the next generations that God himself is the Lord of life, or to find words for life as a gift from God. It is a joy. You cannot keep quiet about it, even if at the core it is a mystery, something that is 'hidden', something we do not always know what to do with. For everybody who brings up children in the faith the joyful tone of this psalm can form the framework.

### **Initiating children**

The church congregation is the place par excellence where this can be achieved. In this respect the first responsibility lies with the parents, but the congregation carries and supports them. How about a faith education course or a group in which parents can exchange experiences. Don't forget to make sure the congregation members get involved with the children in their midst.

*Gerwin (10): It was my birthday last week. I was pleased that Mr. De Boer was there. He is my 'church father'. At first I thought that was a weird name, but that is what he is. When I am in church he always asks how I am and when he goes on holiday he always sends me a postcard. Sometimes he gives me a little present on behalf of the church. The most recent one was an orchid with a card with instructions how to look after it. Of course I try my best to look after it properly.*

Within the church people are actively looking for ways that appeal to children. They are 'initiated' in the community of people who follow Jesus. That is more than just a transfer of information. It is also about atmosphere, about getting involved, about sharing your life with others, being interested in children and not seeing them as annoying disturbers of the peace. When children like going to church this means much to their parents too. Is it possible to make junior church so attractive that children drag their parents to church? Or is that unthinkable?