

Church at Play – A Finnish Approach to Christian Upbringing and Spirituality

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Every once in a while we have to ask ourselves, what is the mission of our Church regarding children and their homes? How do we define our Church? What kind of a role do children have in the worship life? One of the answers is Church at play – a new Finnish approach to Christian upbringing and family work. The vision of Church at play is based on the strategy of Christian upbringing and youth work of the Finnish Lutheran Church. Church at play emphasizes the special importance of small children. The main task of parish educational work is to support and complement the upbringing provided at home.

"Church at Play" is a metaphor that combines two words not usually connected to each other: play and church. The aim of this metaphor is not to illustrate but to raise questions and thoughts. Connecting these two words allures you to consider reality in a new way. The metaphor describes something new that may well be in conflict with the ordinary way of thinking. It raises the question: What would happen if you changed the parts and the roles? Church at play leaves room for your own imagination and individual interpretation. It challenges you to learn and see, to participate and to become an active part of your own personal narrative. When talking about Church at play, curiosity arises. It's like talking about a dream we've all been waiting to come true. Church at play is deeply connected to our dreams, hopes and creativity. It is a reality *and* a dream that arises from mutual hearing and has to be built together as one community.

Church at play considers children as equal members of the faith community. Children have the right to face their religious needs in an individual manner. They need to be offered a chance to nourish their spirituality in forms that best respect their primary experiences. Adults should not only teach children how to think and act – they should also honour children as spiritual teachers. What is needed is a caring relationship between the child and the adult. This relationship is founded on mutual love and respect.

Religion is not understood as a structure of specific moral and cognitive behaviour. Religion is a way of life, a way to creatively cope with existential questions and changing life situations in the light of Christian tradition and language. Children are considered spiritual by nature. Among the fundamental aspects of human nature is the urge to search for meaning. This need is revealed through rituals, prayers, pictures, and words that from the child's point of view represent the "ultimate good". This search for meaning relates the child to God, other people, nature and the inner self. God is hidden yet also present in the human search for meaning as God is present in all His creation. This presence is also the basis of Church at play.

Church at play is not childish but childlike. In this approach mercy, delight, and hope are important values. The understanding of human nature is holistic: Church at play nourishes all of our *six* senses. Worship life includes not only hearing but also seeing, wondering and encountering the Holy. Faith is not understood as a matter of cognitive processes, it involves the whole person. The Holy is

considered as an inseparable and natural part of every child's life reminding us of the meaning and depth of life. In Church at play we:

- protect childhood and support children's cognitive, emotional and spiritual development
- look upon life and children with great wonder and awe
- allow the Church to become reality through playing
- ask why Jesus set a small child as an example of mature spirituality
- wonder about the Holy with all of our senses
- live from grace
- rebuild the bridge between generations
- strengthen the kind of spirituality where children enrich the worship life of the Church and the worship life enriches the life of children and their homes
- contribute to social conversation and influence the public opinion

In this article I describe the theological, historical and pedagogical basis for Church at play. This will involve four steps. First, I will briefly discuss the theological and historical aspects of Church at play. Then, I will characterize the importance of children and play. The third step introduces some methods for religious education and worship life. In step four I will summarize the dream of Church at play. But let us now concentrate on the most important question: Why do we need Church at play?

Why Church at Play?

Church at play has developed from a process of going deep into Bible and the Christian tradition while at the same time recognizing the life and reality of people of the 21st century. Both these aspects are considered equally important and influencing each other.

In the Finnish discussion the history of childhood has been the key concept for the theology of childhood. During the Greco-Roman era children were severely disvalued. Childhood was considered as a meaningless pre-stage to adulthood. Children were sometimes treated as pets whose main function was the amusement of adults. In most severe cases children were abandoned and left alone to die. On the other hand, children had special religious importance: they were innocent and capable mediators between human beings and gods.

Roman upbringing was based on the Roman word "erudire" which refers to the fact that children were considered as a kind of "raw material" that had to be moulded to adults. Greeks were also particularly interested in education. Many of the Greek philosophers pondered over matters concerning children and society. In Athens the aim of education was citizenship. Spartans on the other hand were strongly militarily oriented so children were mainly valued as soldiers.

During the Roman time upbringing was a concern of nuclear families. The aim of education was to mould an adult capable of fulfilling obligations towards gods, state and family. What was in common for the Roman and Greek thinking was that children were valued because of their role as future citizens.

Jewish tradition was a clear exception from the Roman and Greek thinking. Children were valued as gifts from God. In Jewish tradition conceiving and giving birth to children was a vital part of creation. According to Roman historian Tacitus, children were neither abandoned nor killed by their parents in the Jewish tradition. Jews were on a mission for God and this mission was strongly

connected to nationality. Every single child was an important part of the Jewish nation. Children had to be taught how to live as servants of God. This required knowledge of Torah, Hebrew and Tradition.

When you read the gospel of Mark (Mark 10:13-16 and 9:33-37) in its historical frame, you feel shattered. These verses remind us of the dangerous memories hidden in the Christian tradition – memories that seem to have been considered so dangerous that even Paul wasn't aware of them. Paul talks about children in accordance with his Jewish background: children are used as examples of ignorance and naïvete.

Jesus was radically challenging the prevailing view of children when placing a child among the disciples. He didn't consider children as a kind of "raw material" waiting to be educated. Instead, children as representatives of Himself and God were examples of real disciples. This theme emerges from the question: Which one of us is the greatest? An answer to this ultimate question is the child – not as an object of education and teaching but as a subject that is the answer *per se*. A total twist takes place in the teaching process: the last one becomes the first, the smallest becomes the greatest – and the one who is humble as a child becomes the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven.

Both Greco-Roman and Jewish tradition understood teaching as something transmitted from adults to children. The aim of education was to create a perfect human being, a victorious soldier, a cultured thinker, or a humble servant of God. Children were receivers of education always and everywhere. Jesus proposed something totally new: you have to stop searching for the greatest and notice the smallest, the child, instead. Children were placed in the very centre of the Christian church. This importance of children and childhood should also be discovered in our Lutheran Church today. It will eventually lead to the emerging theological process of understanding Christianity in a holistic way.

Church at play is a church of narratives. In the 18th century forces of the Enlightenment moulded people's views of themselves, other people, nature, and God. Intellect became the main source of knowledge. Great narratives were characteristic to the modern world that followed the era of Enlightenment. The history of the 20th century is marked by two great narratives: nations locked in savage wars over ideology and territory, and scientists overturning the received wisdom of preceding generations. Enlightenment also set a challenge to biblical studies – a challenge that is influencing the theological conversation even today.

Post-modernism is often described as an orientation within the philosophy of science, which denies the possibility of acquiring any "true" knowledge about the world. What we know about society is our own construction, which we must deconstruct. The "great narratives" (development, science, freedom, romanticism, truth) are heroic myths that give legitimacy to the existing social order. Post-modern thinking criticizes the hegemony of intellectual deduction as a source of knowledge.

In recent years there has been new theological conversation about the meaning of great and small narratives. Narrative frame of knowing has been found again in a new context – post-modernity. This approach to narratives is often called post-liberal or narrative theology. Post-modern society gives more room to the great narrative of Christianity. The reason for that is the new understanding of the part-whole relationship. At the same time, the whole structure can be found in its parts and the parts of the whole. The method for this is the narrative approach, which gives room to the contextual understanding.

The history of narratives is also a history of mankind. Along with the great narratives there were smaller narratives such as legends, fairytales, myths and poems. Narratives were a way to transfer tradition and moral codes to new generations. Church at play endeavours living interaction between generations. Church is a community for people of all ages.

Children Reveal the Importance of Wonder and Awe

Children open up a whole new world for us. They are sincere, straightforward and exploratory. Sensitivity to emotions and non-verbal communication is deeply rooted in them. Children devote their body and soul to new situations – an ability that we adults have partly lost. Children are genuine in their faith, full of wonder and awe but at the same time doubtful and ruminative. They waylay us with their innermost questions and lead us into life's ultimate secrets – as long as we give them the chance to do so. Again and again we ask ourselves, do we allow children to be children in church?

Church at play is based on the assumption that play is deeply rooted in human nature. Play is a vital part of human interaction. Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) has defined play as the basis of culture. It has developed from the human need to express our thoughts and emotions and to observe other peoples expressions. Play is also a manifestation of relational consciousness. Even when playing alone, we're connected to ourselves, other people, nature and God. This is why play is an important way of expressing one's spirituality in a way that exceeds mere words.

Playing absorbs the player and is entirely voluntary. Playing is self-reinforcing and pleasurable. Children learn new things by playing but learning is not the main concern. What is more important is searching, experiencing, running, hiding, drawing, singing, hearing, seeing and wondering. Play is a multilevel concept. Active presence, excitement, voluntariness, and deep commitment are all distinctive to play. Play is an attitude towards life that opens doors to creativity, consideration, and learning. This is why play is also an important part of adulthood. Playing strengthens feelings of delight, mercy, grace, and hope as a driving force individual and community life.

Play is a serious and vital action. It's a way of preparing oneself for the adult world. And even more, it's a natural way for children to exist and live their lives. With Church at play, we hope to build a church that is characterised by readiness to throw oneself into new experiences, voluntariness, enjoyment, searching, experimenting, wondering and seeing.

Christian Upbringing and Church at Play

Church at play is a vision that can be realized through different kinds of educational methods. The personality of the educator has a strong influence on the methods used. Next, I will present you some of the educational methods used in Finland. Many imported methods of other churches have been adjusted to Finnish context. Church pedagogy is originally a German invention, pedagogical Rosario was developed in Sweden and Godly Play is a method from the United States. In Finland these methods have been further developed and adapted to fit the Finnish language and culture. Next, I will briefly introduce to you some of the methods used in Church at play.

Drama: a Way to Find New Meanings for Familiar Things

One of the main methods in religious education is drama. The roots of a drama are inside every one of us. Church at play allows children to express church by playing. Children are by nature curious and inspired to experiment with new ideas. It's easy for them to step in and out of fictive realities. Imagination is the key to creativity and creativity feeds imagination. The aim of dramapedagogy is to find new meanings for familiar things, to enable questioning and self-expression. Therefore it's vital that the basis for each drama are in childrens own experiences, thoughts, emotions and findings.

Drama is a space for hopes and dreams. Casting and role-taking gives the child a safe way to experience different emotions and situations and to transfer previous experiences into action. Special attention has to be given to creating a trustworthy and tolerant atmosphere. The child learns to accept and understand her own emotions as well as feelings and thoughts of others.

Dramapedagogy emphasizes that there are no right or wrong answers. This standpoint helps children apprehend the incompleteness of life. Drama opens the door to the learning process. It can be seen as a shared journey where learning is understood as an active and creative process that takes place on both individual and collective levels. Both verbal and non-verbal communication skills improve. The child learns how to use her communication skills, personality, thinking and emotions.

The story is told experientially and tractably. The teacher has to be open to the children's own insights and questions. Drama is a holistic experience where all the senses are a source of information. Children can practice the use of different kinds of languages, for example the languages of senses and physics.

Children might already have many experiences of church. These memories can be used as a source of drama. Each child can share her personal experiences in turns while other children act out the memory. It's also possible to improvise over the life of historical figures. The teacher can use different kinds of techniques to illustrate narratives: poems, sounds, pictures, forms and items. Children can for example ask questions from the persons portrayed in the altarpiece or think what kind of a story would the font or the hymn book tell us?

Drama enables physical expression. Children can move around in the church, measure dimensions or express themselves with dance. How would it feel to swing like a church bell or to be as heavy as the pulpit? The teacher really has to fling herself into the project. It's important that the teacher doesn't have too high hopes concerning the methods. Drama is never finished, it's characterized by incompleteness and transience. A good drama-teacher is sensitive to children's reactions and impulses. The outcome of each drama is different and new.

There are thousands of stories in every child waiting to be seen and told. Church at play encourages children to share their greater and smaller narratives and opens up a place to do it in a safe and creative environment. Children have the opportunity to grow in the loving care of God.

Church pedagogy: Experiencing God's Presence in a Holistic Way

The German professor Fulbert Stefensky once wrote that a church is not yet a church when it has been built and inaugurated. The church becomes real with every child that is baptized, every prayer that is said, every deceased that is mourned. The church is not powerfull but it strengthens when people sanctify it with their tears and joy. An important part of Church at play is a method called

church pedagogy. Church pedagogy is a wide concept that can refer to all educational work in the church. In Finland the term points at a structured process of getting to know church as a holy space. Instead of being passive observers, children take a role as active researchers. Children are encouraged to meet their experiences on an emotional level. The main principles of church pedagogy are:

1. *An interactive communication.* In the same way that children need adults to support their play, visitors require a guide who introduces the symbolics and items as well as forms and paintings to them.
2. *Time and peacefulness.* Here the quality substitutes quantity. The amount of new experiences should not take the child at her wit's end.
3. *Spirituality.* Children are warmly welcomed to the church by lighting up candles and by gathering around the altar. A familiar children's hymn, quiet organ music and silence are important elements of the visit.

Church is not a museum, it's a place where children can experience God's presence. The process of getting to know the church takes place in four stages. The first one is perception – What do I see, hear and sense? The second is the acquisition of information – What does it mean? The third stage is comprehension – What does it mean to *me*? The fourth question concerns creativity – How can I take it as part of my every-day life? All the senses are used. You can't understand a church just by looking at it, you have to feel it, hear it and smell it – maybe even taste it.

The visit starts before the children enter the building. Where is the church located? What does it look like from outside? Are there other buildings nearby? What materials have been used in building the church? What kind of expectations do I have when I enter the building?

Before children enter the church they are asked to make a mental note of the first impression. Depending on the group size, children go in in pairs or alone. After entering the church children gather in a circle. This is the same place where the ending takes place, so pay careful attention to choosing a suitable place. After that the children can look for their own favourite place and observe the church from there. Children are encouraged to feel and explore the church in their own creative ways. What does it smell like in the church? What does it sound like when you shout out your name? They also have an opportunity to express what they have experienced through writing, drawing, painting etc. As children take these pieces of work with them as they go home, they literally take a part of the church with them.

Singing Church – Singing Child

Our world is filled with music. Music has a wonderful power to make people happy or sad – to relieve human grief and agony and to fill people with delight and affection. Music is the interpreter of our feelings. In the Bible there are many stories that involve music in some way.

Adults have many ways to enjoy music: if you can't sing or play yourself, you can always listen to your favourite records, go to concerts and operas. In addition to the individual joys of music, adults should be aware of their important role as educators. Music is an important element in a child's life – even in prenatal stages. That's why parents have a key-role in their children's musical development. Familiar songs calm the child down and create a special bond between the child and her parents. During troubled times many people seek refuge in familiar songs from childhood. A child that has lived in a singing environment most presumably continues to pass on the musical

tradition to her own children. Therefore music is also an important link that bounds the generations together.

We are used to categorizing people to those who are musically talented and those who are not. Traditionally musical skills have been measured by the ability to sing. Regardless of the ability to keep in perfect tune, music belongs to everybody. We should spur our children to enjoy the gift of music, despite of their musical talents. It's important that we spur them to experience new ideas and to use their creativity. Through music children can also learn many other important things such as mathematics or motor functions.

Music is not only about hearing, it's also about moving, feeling and playing. All children laugh and sing naturally when they hear music. Children experience music in a holistic way: very often music is related to smells, flavours or touches. Many of our memories involve music. Music is also an important factor in the identity formation process. Through music children are able to create relationships with themselves, other people, and nature. It is also a way of dealing with negative emotions such as fear and aggression. In a multi-cultural world music is a way to break linguistic boundaries.

Music should be an inseparable part of every home, not only through listening but also through singing. Church at play puts a lot of emphasis on singing together. That's why special masses for kids have been developed that involve a lot of singing and playing depending on the children's age. The youngest participants are infants who bring along their parents, grandparents, siblings and godparents. This sort of "family church" requires a lot of preparation since it is the first step into the congregation and further worship life of the church. It's vital that everyone can participate in the mass through singing.

Music starts with silence, but do we have the ability to listen? It's important to teach children that silence is an inseparable part of music. Silence is also a way to concentrate on the relationship that has been established through music, whether it is with oneself, other people or God.

Godly Play: Integrating the Theology of Childhood and Church at Play

Godly Play is a special Bible story telling method developed by Dr. Jerome Berryman. It is an approach to children's spiritual formation that is based on presenting the stories of Christianity, wondering about them together, and then allowing the children to engage the story on their own terms. The method is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition but at the same time it is open to new ideas and creativity.

The stories are told very simply and without any interpretation or moral instruction. After the story is presented, the children and the storyteller wonder together about the aspects of the story that draw their interest. After a time of exploring the story, the story is put away and the children are free to choose the art supplies they would like to work with. They spend some time creating whatever they choose, in response to what they feel is most important in the story, or most interesting. After this, it's time for a joint celebration. Usually this means a glass of milk and a cookie.

There are three kind of basic story categories: the parables, the sacred stories and the liturgical stories. All of these stories include special materials made of wood and fabrics. Detailed manuscripts have been developed for each story that include the gestures, the story line and the wondering questions. The use of Montessorian approach to education has been adapted to Godly

Play in order to stimulate children's active participation in story and ritual and to awaken their creativity.

Godly play is usually offered to children in the context of Sunday school or in church day clubs. The method is widely practised in the Church of Finland and there has also been some attempts to adapt Godly play to religious education offered in public schools. Parish workers visit kindergartens and highschoools. However, since Godly play is primarily a Sunday school method it is not directly suitable for the Finnish school. The most complicated issue is that religious education is non-confessional by nature. So in order to use Godly play in the Finnish school context we would have to simplify the model. The school version could include the presentation, the wondering questions and the children's individual responses to what they have heard and experienced. However, prayers, hymns and other kind of religious practices would have to be left out. Even though, pupils should be offered an opportunity to take part in the traditional Christian festivals and to pass on the Christian tradition within the framework of the school's everyday activities. Therefore the use of Godly play in the public schools should be further considered.

Pedagogical Rosario: a Courageous Attempt to Face Nordic Secularity

Many of us know how to maintain old rituals and customs but only few of us has the courage to build something new, to determinetly search for such Lutheran spirituality that would help and protect todays secularised people. What kind of Christianity would be significant to the children of the 21st century? Martin Lönnebo, a Swedish emeritus bishop has found an answer in the early Christian tradition and narratives. Lönnebo has developed two special methods for religious education: pedagogical Rosario and playful meditation. These methods can be considered a courageous attempt to face the secularised Nordic society.

Although the secularisation hypothesis is largely disputed, it is widely acknowledged that religiousness has taken new forms and shapes. Secularisation is not about abatement or disappearance but modification of religousness. Spirituality is an inseparable aspect of human nature. However, changes in spirituality are an ongoing challenge for the Finnish Lutheran Church. Only a small proportion of parish members in Finland actively participate in the worship life of the Church. The weekly attendance rate in 2000 was equal to 3.2% of the average total membership of the Church. Belief in Jesus as the son of God has declined year after year. A growing number of Finns believe in some sort of higher power instead of a personal god. Something has to be done unless we want Lutheran Christianity to transform into small subculture. According to Lönnebo, the problem is not in ignorance or doubt. On the contrary, Lönnebo emphasizes that it's time for the Church to face up to what it *doesn't* know. In this way the language of religion and theology becomes more like the language of prayer.

Church has to meet people where they are, share their doubt and anxieties and guide them towards trust. The language of faith is the language of prayer and it seeks love, hope, trust and presence. Lönnebö undelines that religious development and natural sciences should not be considered as enemies. It's the ignorance that is the biggest enemy of faith.

This is the societal backround of Lönnebo's methods. Pedagogical Rosario can be considered as "the 21st century catechism". Church has to create new ways of teaching Christianity. The questions of the people in the 21st century are not dogmatical but existential. Religious education has to take these questions for real. Hands and heart have to be given as much weight as the brain. Deeds, faith and thoughts need to be in harmony.

There are eighteen pearls in the Rosario. Twelve of them are round, six oblong. The golden, largest pearl is the pearl of God. It reminds us that we're not alone, someone is supporting us and loving us. The God pearl is followed by six oblong pearls of Silence. Next, there is a small white pearl that is about turning inward. After the I-pearl there is the Baptism pearl that reminds us about love and forgiveness: a start anew. The Desert pearl helps us through the hard times. The Serenity pearl is a place for our faith and courage to grow. The next two pearls of Love are followed by the three Mystery pearls that hold the inner secrets of our heart. The black Night pearl stands for darkness, doubt and anxiety. And finally, the Resurrection pearl celebrates the story of good triumphing over bad.

The basis and content of pedagogical Rosario is deeply rooted in the traditional Christian faith. There are many advantages in this method: people of all ages can use pedagogical Rosario. Since the meaning of the pearls is always individually created it doesn't require intellectual talent. What is most important is that dogmas transform into prayer. Pedagogical Rosario can be understood as an image of the Holy, an open icon that helps children grow towards mature spirituality. The use of pedagogical Rosario emphasizes prayer and meditation. Rosario is seen as an instrument for encountering and interpreting conflicting life situations and experiences. This method puts a lot of weight on ethical education. Lönnebo calls this "training for benevolence". Children need to learn how to be patient, grateful, friendly and caring.

Lönnebo underlines the importance of Christian upbringing and parish family work. The most vital task for the Church is to teach children how to pray. Praying is the most natural way for children to approach the Holy. Prayer is an attitude towards life, an all-embracing connection with God. One of the most important aspects of prayer is silence. Prayer includes non-verbal communication, touching and breathing. It nourishes our whole body and soul.

It's not the children who lack the courage to encounter God in a creative manner. Do we have the courage to give them enough time and freedom to face their own spirituality? Do we give them enough support when playing with God? Parish children's work begins with the adults. Start with praying for yourself. You are a parttaker, not an instructor. Pedagogical Rosario opens up a possibility for equal encounter with children. Children are allowed to be children and learning is considered as a mutual process between the child and the adult.

The term playful meditation refers to the concrete use of pedagogical Rosario with a group of children. Play is one form of meditation. A child wants to be something – and all of a sudden she becomes that. The child becomes one with her play. This is why children by nature are masters of meditation. Playful meditation is deeply connected to dreaming. The thing that separates meditation from everyday daydreaming is the use of pedagogical Rosario. The talent of dreaming is directed to talking with God. It's a way of getting to know the secrets of Christianity.

The life of the child becomes deeply connected to the life of Jesus. The experiences of life are encountered with pictures and stories. There are no age limits in existential experiences. When children grow up, they have no difficulties in preserving their religious beliefs. Since beliefs are founded on intimate and authentic experiences they won't become naive as children's cognitive abilities develop.

Careful attention has to be directed to the physical environment. The space needs to promote the atmosphere of worship and presence. Beauty, silence and meditative music are important aspects of meditation. The basic formula of playful meditation is:

1. Use the sound of a bell to invite children to worship and meditation
2. Light up a candle in front of the theme picture standing on the altar
3. Start with the Pearl of God and it's song
4. Continue to the Pearl of Silence (you can use sounds of nature to help children quiet down)
5. Move over to the pearl that represents today's theme. In the beginning it might be useful to use the picture but gradually it's best to keep eyes shut
6. End meditation by returning to the Pearl of God. Read a blessing then stay in peace and quiet for a while. Use the same music as in the beginning. Children can now leave the meditation room in silence while the music is still on.

Playful meditation is natural for adults, too. According to Lönnebo, the art of meditation is an art of becoming like a child.

Worship Life and Church at Play

The key of worship life is presence. Children are present at their play. In the same way, church endeavours to be present where people live – The Lutheran Church is an inseparable part of Finnish everyday life. The third dimension of presence is the presence of God. The presence of God challenges parents and parish workers to dwell upon how to prepare a sermon that prepares children a way to encounter the Holy Spirit. The intensiveness of spiritual experience is often described as "flow". Flow is an experience of concentrated attention giving way to a liberating feeling of the activity managing itself, or being managed by some outside influence. Church at play emphasizes presence: parish workers and members of the congregation are present to each other and God. Everyone is invited to share the common experience.

In recent years, different kinds of masses have grown up alongside the traditional church service. We think and try to get all people to think that the varied and wide-ranging worship life is a true richness. We are especially looking for worship life that takes people of all ages into consideration. The varied worship life is a fundamental part of the process towards mature Christianity. We wish that children are always given the opportunity to take part in the arrangements for the sermon. And we pray each sermon is constructed according to the children's level of cognitive, motoric and emotional development.

The bedrock of all worship life is prayer. It's not merely about words or silence but a special attitude towards life. It's vital that parents and congregational workers teach children how to pray. Child's first prayer is usually an evening prayer. The basic forms of the prayer remain unchanged despite the fact that the understanding of the prayer and God's presence may deepen. In the throes of insecurity prayer helps us to trust in God's care. In a sermon, prayer is lived out through illustrative ways: singing, movement and intimacy. Tradition is interwoven with creativity and spontaneity in a special way. Church at play emphasizes the holy communion as a moment of celebration that transcends the generation gap. The holy communion is a highlight of the sermon – especially for children.

Most children enjoy daily routines. Familiarity increases the feeling of security. This is why the worship life of the church favours permanent customs and rituals. A familiar hymn gives great pleasure to a child as it reoccurs in sermons over and over again. At the same time surprises are an important element of children's lives. Children marvel at things that most adults consider obvious. Wondering spiritual matters comes close to celebration: Look how great God is! Look how wonderful all his creation is!

Careful attention has to be paid to aesthetic experiences. Every child has the right to quiet down in a beautiful environment. God's voice can only be heard in silence. The sermon is always a moment of celebration – not because we've seen so much trouble organizing it, but because of the presence of God. This celebration is not a formal "black tie party" but light-hearted and spontaneous, containing silence and play. God loves us despite of our merits. This is why worship life is open to everybody regardless of sex, age or skin-colour. The elements of childrens worship life – rituals, wonder, celebration – nurture adult spirituality, too.

Parish educational work supports and complements the upbringing provided at home. Church at play presumes that all adults are committed to nourishing children's spirituality. One of the most important elements of Christian upbringing and parish family work is blessing. Children are being blessed in sunday schools, special masses for kids, parish day-care clubs, confirmation classes etc. The parishes also have many forms of cooperation with the local primary and lower secondary schools. School services are organized in virtually all parishes, and parish workers visit schools to speak at morning assemblies.

Worship life of the church at play encourages children to be children. This is shown as sincere caring for every member of the community. Of central importance is the aim of encouraging children to make new discoveries in accordance with their own interests and giving them enough time to ask questions, to think, and to draw conclusions. Parish workers commit themselves to exploring new ways of transmitting God's love and care. Support for parenthood is another important aspect of the parishes' work with children. Children are given the right to grow in loving care of mutual blessing.

The Dream of Church at Play

What happens when the Church takes the essence of the child and play for real? Then the wisdom of children will come forward and flourish and adults come in on their pearl of wisdom.

- Church at play invites people of all ages to throw themselves into playing
- People receive deep experiences, find new solutions and make new insights
- All kind of emotions are allowed in church at play. Everyone has the right to express one's feelings and needs
- Church at play encourages people to use their imagination and creativity, to try new things and fool around. Deep aesthetic experiences enrich human life in a special way
- Church at play is not merely about happiness and laughter, it's also about tears and mourning
- Church at play opens up a possibility to retire to solitude and stillness
- Church at play invites people as they are. You can ask: Who am I? What kind of a person am I? How can I make my life meaningful? How do I express my hopes, strivings and faith?
- In Church at play the community is a sanctuary for all
- Church at play opens up a possibility to throw oneself into the loving care of God
- Church at play opens doors to make encounterings with the Holy possible. It is a way of entering the Great Secret

It's important that every parish worker commits herself to living up to the dream of Church at play. Church at play has to be defined by the individual living in a certain community: What does this mean in my congregation and in my work community? Church at play is already here. We need to decide how it will develop and grow. It's not a concept or vision that can be totally

defined. It's the reality we're building in our everyday life. We hope that Church at play helps us to better understand what Jesus meant when he said that anyone who would enter God's kingdom must accept it "like a little child" (Mark 10:15). And we believe this is the way God's Holy Spirit is working in our Church today and in the future.

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