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**Coronavirus, Anxiety, Children And The Church**

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*With an increase in the number of churches suspending the common cup and even canceling services in response to COVID-19, there is need to discuss the long-term impact of how we manage and narrate pastoral responses to this pandemic, particularly where children are involved, so as to not allow adult anxieties to take over the story.*

**What And How Are You Sharing About COVID-19?**

How parents talk to their children about abstaining from the common cup and other modifications at church is wrapped up in how parents talk to children about the COVID-19 pandemic, including: language used to describe the virus, what is happening, and the danger it poses; how parents act and prepare their household, as households stock up on non-perishables or enact new rules around touching things; how parents respond to children when they touch things, etc.

**Setting A Non-Anxious Tone**

Children are already receiving messages about the significance of social modifications through their parent/adult anxieties and subtle or explicit displays of it. How we deal with conversations about COVID-19 overall, shares much in common with how we discuss other things that impact our communities—global warming, gun violence, racism, police shootings, etc. In these instances we recognize the need to inform in a developmentally appropriate matter without sheltering, to caution where necessary, and to keep anxieties from becoming overwhelming for children.

It is important to keep in mind that children don’t have their own anxieties about these things, until we share them. **Avoid assuming an anxiety about the cup that may not be present for children in the same way.** My own daughter receives only bread because she does not like the taste of the wine (she is four). We have already told her that Communion is a gift and that Jesus is present to her even if she only receives bread.

**Reframing Developmentally And Theologically**

Children are going to be most concerned by things that can harm *them*and *the closest people they love.*They need to feel a sense of power that they can make changes that will make things better. We might say “This pandemic requires us to do something different. We have been asked to think about people in our community who need us to show them love by acting in ways that protect them while this sickness is happening, we are going to need to find new and creative ways to follow Jesus for people who are struggling at this time.”

With these things in mind, here is some practical advice for churches who may be advising parents and adult members of the household.

**Explain and detail events in a manner that is matter-of-fact.**Details about the [COVID-19](https://healthier.stanfordchildrens.org/en/how-to-talk-with-kids-about-covid-19/), abstaining from the common cup, etc. You might say: “The common cup will not make us sick, but there are people in our community who are at an increased risk for becoming sick and this is one way we can support them.”

**State explicitly and affirmatively that when it is time to return to sharing the Eucharist, Communion wine is safe.** Here’s what I will say to my kids: “You are safe at church and you are loved there. People are looking out for you and we are looking out for them too. It is safe for you to drink the wine and we will do that together as a family and as a church when we are drinking the wine again.”

**Avoid developmentally inappropriate concepts that inspire a sense of existential threat and powerlessness.** Describing a pandemic to children younger than 3rd or 4th grade makes little sense because they do not have a developed sense of global geography and the impacts are abstract while communicating “this problem is so big and threatening and we have no power.”

**De-center children.**Share concerns and solutions in a way that doesn’t center children as those who are threatened. We tell them that we are all abstaining from the common cup (and washing our hands, modifying behavior, etc.), because people in our congregation might be sick or elderly and need our help to stay healthy.

**Pray together for people in your church who are vulnerable**. Households might already be in relationship with someone in the church who is sick, immunocompromised, or otherwise at risk. This is a great opportunity to pray for that person and to give them a call and check in!

**Focus on what kids can do and how they can participate in being the church.** Saying “this is about protecting others who are already sick/elderly/etc.” helps kids have a sense of responsibility for the rest of the body of Christ and communicates that they have power, too.

**Join in Church-actions.** If the church engages in direct ministry in response to this pandemic, by establishing a food bank for food insecure persons, for example, get families and kids involved (money, time, work) and explain that Christians respond to crisis not with fear, but by finding creative ways to love and care for our neighbor.

**Explain that this is for a limited period of time.** This is a bit abstract, since time is experienced differently for young children and even short periods can leave an outsized mark on children’s memories, but that is why anxiety in communication matters so much. You might say “we are being extra careful right now, but soon we will have a better idea of the best ways to support people who get sick.”

**Share developmentally appropriate facts.** Children 4th grade and older will possibly be interested in the [facts](https://www.brainpop.com/health/diseasesinjuriesandconditions/coronavirus/) and [science](https://newsela.com/text-sets/2000187482?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWVdKa09UQTNOR015T1RRMCIsInQiOiJmcnBHaDZpOWtjd1BQMHpxaDk3VHIzZkxTMjZYWnNWZFVvc0RTXC94cEpxS1VxYlVRUHBueDhtQlkrVnlTMDU2MkpYbUh1VTBpRnliZERObzFtdnUrRTA3UXl0SVwvd0VSQ3BwclwveXNuT2hBcU1BcUR2YXBpK1JUUGwxbzlrUE5uayJ9). They may want to see charts and graphs from the [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html), World Health Organization or hear about some of the science involved in collective action. They also may want to know scientifically why the common cup is safe. Share [fact-based information](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf) you know from reliable sources.

**Returning To Normal**

Parents and congregations can do the above, but think long-term, too. Churches will want to renormalize the use of the Common Cup for young people who may be skeptical.

**Invite every Sunday School class on a tour of the sacristy when your congregation believes it is safe to do so.** Ask a member of the clergy and/or ministry staff to lead a tour. This gives the church a chance to speak directly to children about our practices of receiving wine from the common cup in a way most fitting to the context. It gives the church an opportunity to address lingering questions (some might have to do with COVID-19 or the transmission of germs and disease and others may not!). The goal is to renormalize and discuss the benefits of the cup through a formal introduction to the church’s holy things.

**Ask your Sunday School teachers to read about the gifts**. [The Man and the Vine](https://www.amazon.com/Man-Vine-Jane-G-Meyer/dp/0881413151) by Jane Meyer talks specifically about the gift of wine, grown from grapes, tended by human hands, given to God, and in turn received from God as a gift. You might say to children: “We can trust that God gives us good and beautiful gifts and this gift is amazing because it is of God.”

**Let Love Cast Out Fear**

It’s easy to get caught up in the minute by minute anxieties of a crisis with such an unpredictable and global impact. It is essential, however, that the church continues to do what it has always done in the face of danger. We gather, in whatever ways we are able, proclaim that Jesus is Lord, worship him in Spirit and truth, and serve one another. We have an opportunity to ask how the church can find creative and imaginative ways to love our neighbor and to embody Christ in the midst of a world full of anxiety and fear. We can bring our children along as we work together to love our neighbor. Indeed, in the end, it may be children who find the most creative ways for the people of God to be present as Christ in our communities.

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