

A child was bored in the service

By Geoff Thomas

An elder preceded the minister into the pulpit and then came to the front and addressed the congregation. "Last week ... a child was bored in the service." A gasp went through the congregation. Men looked at their feet, women cried quietly, and children went white. "The church officers are meeting with the minister during the week and will announce our conclusions next Sunday. In the meantime we want to apologise to that child and his parents and all the other children," the elder concluded before leaving the pulpit. The ashen-faced preacher came to the pulpit, and in a trembling voice began the service ...

This imaginary scenario is not very far from the prevailing ecclesiastical situation today in which many consider the worst sin a church can commit is to bore children. Yet is not the routine and dull pattern of much of our toil the very life which all mankind must face, especially in the Third World. We shall be ill-equipped for living if we do not come armed and trained to be bored much of the time. Many of the hours fathers spend at work are boringly repetitive, while the work mothers do is a regimen of tedious chores.

The background to the churches' determination to make their worship boredom-free zones is a era of rampant materialism which the western world has never experienced before. For example, at parties today each child who comes expects to go home with a party bag full of goodies. Entertainers are booked, magicians, and performers - one, for example, will bring half a dozen exotic animals, - a snake, a huge owl, a spider, a lizard. That entertainer charges £500 for a visit.

Parents spend ridiculous sums of money on clothes, toys and other fripperies for their children. Almost every boy and girl has more than they can possibly enjoy. Nobody can imagine that they are happier for this glut. Impoverished parents often feel under great pressure to work insanely long hours or to contract unsustainable debts - or both - to buy superfluous luxuries for their children. We have lost any idea that austerity - not unremitting poverty, but a decent restraint - might actually be of benefit to children. It is not easy for the body of Christ to preach self-denial and cross-bearing in the midst of a frenzied spending spree. It has become a disaster for many congregations, especially in the USA.

We no longer expect children to endure boredom for a second. In our infancy we bounced balls, fed the rabbits, made a model with Meccano and watched the

ascent and descent of a yo-yo. We also read books. Our meals were pretty predictable, and a visit to the local park was an event. Today visits to the zoo, bouncy castles, jumping on a trampoline are routine necessities. Daily playgroups and day-nurseries fill every vacant minute with watching videos, learning how to play with computers and bouncing on the soft-play. Everything is wound up to a pitch of noisy razzmatazz. The toys children play with are made of garish plastic of primary colours. The child who would cheerfully have eaten mashed potatoes and vegetables every day is now encouraged to stimulate its palate and develop a taste for chillies, aubergines, vindaloo curry or garlic.

A.N. Wilson has written, "Pascal said that all human trouble stemmed from our inability to sit quietly in one room. If he was right, then we have serious trouble ahead, with an extraordinarily restless, vacuous generation of human individuals waiting to take over the world. The lesson of how to be bored must be learnt if the child is to grow up sane, and this is for two reasons.

First, boredom is what most human lives consist of. Few jobs are interesting all of the time; and when retirement age has been reached, the long days of emptiness cannot possibly be entirely devoid of tedium. Learning how to cope with these periods of vacancy can actually reduce, or eliminate their boringness. A human being who has only grown up with the notion that he or she must be stimulated all the time will never be able to assuage ennui in the way that we grown-ups do - by walks, gardening, crosswords, or the inner life.

And this is the second and greater reason for hoping that a child will learn how to cope with an eventless afternoon. Out of what feels like boredom comes the capacity to be inward. Unless you have been bored, an essential part of your imagination will never have been allowed to grow. Stories, poetry, prayer and mathematics, all activities which have stretched the human race ... have developed out of its capacity to live with boredom."

But into the morning services all over the land come children carrying bags, and in their bags they have colouring books, pencil boxes, toys, small computers, reading books etc. This is because there is no Sunday School going on at the same time as the sermon, and it would be an unthinkable disaster if children were to be bored. These families never bring their children to the evening service for the same reason. I know a church in Africa which has a white pastor. Several other white Christian missionaries and their families worship there, but the other white mothers and their children do not attend the morning service, leaving the building and going home after the pre-service Sunday School. Only the men remain and worship, but every other family in the church, who are all African, and whose second language is English, are there for the entire service. Is it the western world's hatred of boredom that is affecting us?

We are speaking of churches where there is the power of God in the ministry. There is relevance, application, affection for the congregation, illustration and

the presence of the Spirit upon the Word. Men and women are being converted and sanctified. The children are always spoken to, and the whole service is over in 75 minutes. Yet still during those services the children are encouraged to be stimulated by anything other than the message being preached to them. Imagine you could take your children to listen to Spurgeon preaching. Would you go with a bag full of distractions to occupy them during the sermon, or would you pray that they would be touched and converted by his pleading message?

Where there are enough bored families a great change takes place. Sunday mornings are designated on notice boards, "Family Worship," and everything is done in a lively manner with the children in mind. The focus is no longer on what pleases Almighty God. The tunes are lively, accompanied by a band. There are all kinds of visual stimuli, overhead projectors, choreography and drama spots. Laughter registers the successfulness of the service. Many people take part, and the role of the minister is to be master of ceremonies. Every item is brief, and before the short sermon the children are taken out - even up to 16 years of age - to have their own classes of Sunday School elsewhere. They are taken away from the man whom God has called, given authority and teaching gifts to, and they are taken to people who base what they say on books written by other people. There is no likelihood of a man of the Word being called to the pastorate in such congregations. They are doomed to a future of superficial religion.

But children are unregenerate. They do not know God. There is a natural enmity in their hearts against him. Their boredom is not principally caused by their immaturity but because of their hearts of stone. This is to be combated by the loving lives of their parents, regular family devotions in which they become familiar with the teaching of the Bible, the language of prayer and they are confronted with their need to be born again. Their parents' love, respect and enthusiasm for the church services, the pastor and his preaching will be contagious. They will admire and hear the one to whom their parents pay such attention. But where the parents themselves are bored - or just one parent - then there is little hope for the children becoming gripped with the most exciting message in the world - the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When children have been taught to sit still at home, and hear the word of God read each day, and listen to parents coming with thanksgiving and petition to a heavenly Father who cares and provides every good thing the children experience, then they sweetly learn to be still during a sermon on Sunday morning, and to cry from their childish hearts to the Lord for help to worship and serve him, the living God.