

October 16, 2011 / Children's Sabbath Sunday / David L. Edwards

## **A Community for and with Children**

Matthew 18:1-5 and Mark 10:13-16

This morning I want to pick up and expand on something Sandy Fisher shared when she spoke the last Sunday in August. It was about an emerging sense that God is leading us to be a community and a place that is increasingly focused on children. Kaye Edwards is always saying to churches that if we do what is best for children, we do what is best for everyone. Jesus said if we stay close to young children, they can lead us into the way of living for which God created us, what Jesus called the kingdom of God. They are our teachers. What would it be like if we became, more and more, a community and a place where children were safe, nurtured, affirmed, where they could touch deeply their lives in relation to the creation and to God? Would we not increasingly discover and live the life God created us to live?

One afternoon in August, I was on my John Deere riding mower, taking care of the lawns at Pantops. I call this my "tractor therapy." It has a way of freeing my mind and spirit, opening me up to glimpse the deeper and wider sense of things. Camp KBY had just ended. The New York work group had come and gone. Things were quieting down after another very full summer. I was reflecting on how this place and our community touches the lives of so many people, and in what ways. I especially thought of children and young people who, when they are here, touch something at the heart of life--their relationship with others, with nature, with themselves, and with that unnamable Source of Life we call God. It is true of those who come to stay in the retreat center, as well. One of our Korean guests this summer wrote in the guest journal: *During the stay in this cottage, I realized again I'm part of great Nature and in the[sic]Nature I can find peace and health in body and soul.* The feverish pace of life, the numbing immersion in technology, all the things in our culture that obscure and distort what really matters and who we really are as human beings...all can be set aside and put in right perspective in this place. Oh yes, children and youth suffer pressure and stress, too. What is experienced here is not an escape from life. It is an invitation to come home to who we really are. I was seeing the whole picture of what this place means, its mission and ministry in the lives of all who come here, as well as in our own lives.

First, there is Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, the whole reason these forty acres were purchased and preserved, to be a place set apart and sanctified for children to do what children are supposed to do--play and be in the outdoors, growing in the unshakable knowledge that they are part of God's good creation. Since coming here eight years ago, I have noticed a drifting apart that has taken place among the three ministries that were born in this place: Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship, Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, and the Church of the Covenant. Part of this was due to the philosophy that ministries need to stand on their own financially and otherwise. That is a good approach, but it has had its drawbacks. We lose sight of the important dimension of being partners in a common work.

Will Cardwell has led us in a fresh and needed direction this past year by calling together and guiding an advisory group representing LCF, the camp, and the church. The group meets every two months to look at these forty acres and the needs that are facing us, and to find ways of working more closely together. As a result of this, the camp and the church, including Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center, have found an emerging and renewed sense of partnership that is truly exciting and fulfilling.

Then something dawned on me that afternoon as I pattered around on my tractor: We, the Church of the Covenant community, have 80-85 children each week for seven weeks every summer on these grounds! These are our children, too! Back in the early 1950s, the little recreation program for young people started in the basement of the Cosby home, and Lynchburg Christian Fellowship was organized to be the supporting structure for it. There also was needed a spiritual community to support and nurture all of this, and so the Church of the Covenant was born. From the beginning, the identity and purpose--the soul--of our church community was about children and this place.

It felt very clear to me that God is leading us back to that original sense of mission. Pat Haley, camp director, and Kelly Stinnette, assistant director, are eager for a closer relationship between the camp and the church. In these days of economic difficulty for non-profits, Camp KBY needs all the help and support we can give. In September, the Covenant Members passed a budget for 2011-12, making Camp KBY the largest item in our outward giving budget--\$3,000 for this year. This was the result of our looking at ways we could focus and intensify our outward giving in a more effective way. I think that as we are open to it, there will emerge other ways that we can be supportive of KBY now and in the future. There may be some in our church community who feel called to be involved in the camp and its work in some specific way. Don

Morrison and Curtis Harper have already responded to such a call, as they are expanding the organic garden not only to serve the camp but also to provide food for people beyond this place. All of us can enfold the camp's staff, board, and children in our daily times of prayer. I encourage each of you to make a time next summer, when camp is in operation, to come by and see the wonder that is Camp KBY, and feel your part in it, your connection with it. We have always appreciated Camp KBY and been very thankful for it and proud of it. I think, however, that we are being led to be more intentional and focused in our awareness of the gift of KBY, and in our involvement with and support of the camp. I ask us to grow in our vision of the KBY children as OUR children.

For a number of months now, an emerging mission group has been meeting to work with the vision of a small outdoor preschool program on this property. Evi Kaiser, Alys Hickcox, and Rachel Wilson meet once a month at this point to explore this possible mission and to see if this is something to which God is calling them.

Some of us have been very influenced by the writings of Richard Louv, particularly his book *THE LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS*. What he has said is being echoed by a growing chorus of professionals who work with children--psychologists, teachers, sociologists, and the like. It is something spiritual teachers through the centuries have told us--to be fully human, we need to know ourselves in relation to nature, to the universe, to God's creation. We all suffer from what Richard Louv has called "nature deficit disorder," the diminishment or even loss of our connection to nature, to the creation. This makes the work Camp KBY even more urgent. Developing a program for young children that would find them outdoors most of their day, learning, exploring, growing in their imaginations and in their sense of belonging in this world, would give us a year around use of this property for children. Please hold this mission group in mindfulness and prayer, that if this indeed is God's call to them, they will find the way to let this further ministry for children emerge through their gifts, commitments, and efforts, when the time is right.

Kaye Edwards will be retiring at the end of March after sixteen years as Director of Family and Children's Ministries for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She will not quit working on behalf of children, however, and is opening herself to possibilities. Kaye is reflecting on the possibility of establishing here at the Church of the Covenant and Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center a training center for Children Worship & Wonder. A part of this would be the ongoing CW&W program for our own church community, and

possibly a weekday program for children in the wider community. We have already had trainings here for CW&W, and in November there will be a retreat for CW&W trainers from all over the country. We are very pleased that Olivia Stewart will be here, as well. Olivia is a young ordained minister and granddaughter of Sonja Stewart who, with Jerome Berryman, wrote the book *YOUNG CHILDREN AND WORSHIP*, upon which CW&W is based. Also with us will be Sally Selzer, of Worship Woodworks, who makes the stories for Children Worship & Wonder. Please hold Kaye in prayer as she works with God's call in her life at this point.

Kaye and Mike Buhler have been meeting for some months now, working with the vision of opening the Lodge of the Fisherman in the mornings as a place for community. It would be a place where people can come for coffee or tea, bring their book or laptop, where young parents could bring their young children, and the children would be welcomed. Who knows what could grow out of this? A support group for parents. A way of introducing people to Camp KBY and the Church of the Covenant. If there emerged an outdoor school, maybe a place where the parents could meet together for friendship and mutual support. Just another possibility for this place of beauty, peace, and people touching their own lives at a deeper level, and touching the lives of children.

We now have a place in our budget for both the New Lodge Mission and for Children's Ministries, to which some of us are already making a financial commitment. As new ministries for and with children emerge, we will have seed money to begin with. I invite you to consider this as you look at your own outward giving.

Kaye and I are moving toward becoming foster parents. This is one of the reasons we were very interested in the possibility of living at Pantops, a home where the vision of children and their needs thrived. We think that spacious and gracious home, along with all that is and goes on in this property, would be a wonderful environment for a child. Should this take place, Kaye will be talking with you about our desire that you, as our community, support us in this adventure. Here is another dimension of being a community centered on the needs of children, that we give active support to those in our community who are caring for children.

As a community, we have had and will have different ministries and missions emerging in response to the needs of our city and world. What has caught my heart and imagination since coming here is the vision of what is and can be here in this place, and in our community. It is what I feel called to be mindful of, to nurture, and to work toward.

I sometimes hear comments about how many of us are aging. Behind this is perhaps a worry that we won't have younger people to take up our life and work. Or maybe it is out of our own anxiousness as we face the inevitable limitations and the finality of our lives. It seems clear to me that the remedy for this is for us to grow in awareness that our own lives are part of a great flow of life, from generation to generation. As a church community, we have always tried to be faithful to the truth that trying to preserve ourselves means death. It is only by continuing to be who God calls us to be and staying faithful to what God calls us to do that we will find life, for ourselves and our community. And it is when we reach beyond ourselves and our own lives to embrace and be concerned for children, and all that sustains life for children, that anxiousness about our own lives is eased. The very meaning of our lives is found in knowing ourselves to be part of that great fabric and flow of life in which we find our lives by giving them.

So I share with you this vision for us as a spiritual community and a place for children, where we learn more and more fully the truth of Jesus' teachings, that if we receive, welcome, and learn from young children, we will find the kingdom of God, right here, right now.