

GRACE NOTES

News from and about Grace Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan

#2-1

January, 2010

Welcome New Members

Ed and Ann Smith come to us from Midland Park, New Jersey. They celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary November 4, 2009. They both grew up in New Jersey, lived and raised their three children there. They have 8 grandchildren ages 5-18. Two of their children live in Grand Rapids. In New Jersey Ed was a self-employed builder and volunteered for many years for Habitat for Humanity and for the last 6 was Project Director. Ann was a nurse, mother and wife who spent time volunteering leadership in a Community Bible Study. Ed enjoys golfing, while Ann likes to garden, read and walk. Together they attend many sports events and concerts watching their grandchildren participate. They are happy at Grace Church and are already working on Tuesdays with the Food Give Away Program. They have been blessed by Grace and pray that they will be a blessing to us.



Making changes in communion practices makes some people uneasy. It's as if we are tampering with divinely instituted procedures. Many of us grew up with carefully monitored rules about who may be invited to the Lord's Table and with highly formalized practices – remember elders sitting in the front row? Interestingly, scripture is silent about most of these human-made rules and regulations.

Grace Church's communion practices have been more inclusive than some congregations who have restricted participation to professing members. We have welcomed to the table people with cognitive impairment as well as those from varied faith traditions as long as they are sorry for their sin and believe in God's forgiveness. Without saying it, we seem to have realized that we are all guests at the banquet as a result of God's inexhaustible mercy.

Several years ago Grace Church, through the efforts of Pat Nederveld, Ruth Vander Hart, and Pastor Kooreman, developed a plan for involving more children in the sacrament, a plan that included a public profession of faith similar to what has traditionally occurred with adolescents and older individuals who desired adult membership in the church. Only one of our children has become a communicant member through this process.

For about twenty years the CRC has been debating the participation

of children in communion. A Faith Formation Committee appointed by Synod of 2007 is presently working on this and related issues and will prepare a complete set of recommendations for Synod of 2012. However, in an extensive report to Synod of 2010, the committee goes on record as favoring the invitation of baptized children to the Lord's Table. You can read this careful report by googling Christian Reformed Church Faith Formation Committee and opening the pdf. called "New Lord's Supper Report."

Worship Committee would like to see a greater number of Grace Church's children participating in communion. We agree with the denomination's Faith Formation Committee that it is not necessary to connect a traditional public profession of faith with participation in the Lord's Supper. In fact, we think that doing so may actually discourage some children and their parents and thus be a barrier to the work of the Spirit in nurturing faith through the sacrament.

We have discovered an approach being used at 14th Street CRC in Holland, MI that we think has promise for accomplishing our goal of a more inclusive and intergenerational observance of communion. We recommend that Grace Church move ahead with our version of this process now. Here are the steps:

1. Any baptized children who indicate to their parents that they love the Lord and that they want to participate in communion are eligible. Parents inform their elder or the pastor of their child's desire to participate, after which the elder and/or pastor meet with the child and parent(s). This does not have to be a long meeting and may take place in the child's home or at church before or after worship. The object is neither to instruct nor to test the child's knowledge but simply to hear the child's expression of faith in whatever manner is appropriate for that

child's level of development.

2. The elder or pastor will report a child's desire to participate at the next Council meeting. The profession will be entered into Council's minutes, be reported in the bulletin and announced during the next service at which communion is celebrated.

3. Every fall the church secretary will supply the elders with a list of children who have not yet made known their desire to participate. The elders or pastor will contact the families of these children to encourage them to consider their children's readiness to receive the sacrament.

Some worry about disconnecting communion from intellectual understanding of its deep meanings. The truth is none of us completely understands the mystery of communion. In fact, we engage in these symbolic gestures or acts because their meaning is too deep for words. The disciples who accompanied Jesus on the Emmaus road recognized him only in the breaking of the bread. Communion is a supernatural experience; God's Spirit is present and moves about during the meal. Participating meaningfully does not depend on our ability to understand words or articulate what is happening. We experience God's grace in our bones as we share the bread and juice. Very young children know when they are loved and when they belong. For all of us, communion is an experience of knowing we belong to our faithful savior who thinks we are precious and loves us beyond measure. When sharing the loaf and cup, we also are reminded that we belong to the body of believers that is Grace Church.

It is reasonable to wonder what parents or the church can expect from a child when considering their participation in communion. A three or four-year-old is obviously not the same developmentally as someone who is ten or eighteen. The language and thinking skill of the child will affect how deep a conversation can occur and how abstract it may get. The point, however, is not to find out what a child knows in order to see if he/she knows enough. The basic questions are "Does this child love Jesus?" and "Does he/she want to have bread and juice when we have communion?"



With younger children who may be less verbal, it is perfectly fine for a parent to tell what the child has said or done that signals their readiness for participation. With a shy child who may simply nod in response to questions asked or comments made, that is enough. Older children may understand more and talk more. It may be appropriate to spend a few minutes explaining that the bread and juice help us remember that Jesus loved us and died for us. The metaphors of body and blood may be confusing or even alarming to developmentally young children, however, and should be avoided. The questions traditionally associated with a public profession of faith do not need to be asked or answered.

Participation of children in communion does not preclude an adult profession of faith in which someone is welcomed into the full life of the church. Worship Committee thinks that an "Adult Faith Commitment" should be required, typically by the time a person reaches age eighteen. Already in 1995 when Synod encouraged congregations to develop procedures for younger children to make a public profession of faith and become communicant members, they asked each congregation to develop "an appropriate means for securing a commitment to the creeds of the Christian Reformed Church and to the responsibilities of adult membership" (e.g., voting, serving in church office). We will

need to work on this, and help from the denominational Faith Formation Committee will soon be available.

Christ's sacrifice was for all of us, regardless of our age, maturity, intellect, or linguistic ability. With infant baptism, we acknowledge that membership in the covenant family is not earned. When we gather around the table with children, we are reminded of who and whose we are. Welcoming children to the table, then, is not just for them, but for all of us. As the final words of invitation suggest, "The gifts of God for (all) the people of God."

Children can help us respond to God's holy party with joy. At one congregation's celebration, a child exclaimed, "That tastes good!" in response to sharing the bread and juice. Exactly. Imagine things children might say and do: smile, laugh, twirl around. Such happiness and delight. God loves me! I'm part of his family! Unless we become like a child, we cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Worship Committee believes the new process we are proposing makes it easier for children to come to the Lord's Supper, to everyone's benefit; and it anticipates a later public ceremony at which time individuals will make an adult faith commitment and be welcomed to share in all the responsibilities of life in our faith community at Grace.

Tom Hoeksema, Chair of Worship Committee



Candles

Each year as part of our celebration of Advent and Christmas we use a number of candles. We are often able to reuse many of them in various ways, but not all of them and as a result we have many old candles we would like to pass on to someone who works with recycling candles. In the past there was someone we knew that made new candles from the old ones, but that person is no longer doing that, so we are looking for someone who can recycle old candles. Please let inform Chris or Greta Overvoorde, or the Church Office, if you know of someone who does that kind of work.

All the previous issues of Grace Notes can now be found on our website thanks to Steve Karr. Since we prepare and print Grace Notes in black and white, you will only see the the news letter in black and white. If someone want to underwrite the cost of doing it in color talk with Chris Overvoorde and he will gladly switch to doing it all in color. Also check out the latest news and image on the Grace Church Facebook pages where a number of members have shared responses and images.