



Children's 'voice' in faith settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

The first ever Commissioner for Children in the history of South Africa was appointed in the Western Cape from 1 June 2020. She is responsible for protecting and promoting child rights, interests and needs. Her office provides oversight for the Departments of Education, Health, Social Development as well as Cultural Affairs and Sport. Her mandate is to monitor, investigate, research, educate, lobby, advise and make recommendations to especially government about practice, policy and law. She also has a special duty of child participation within her office. To this effect, she has recruited a group of children who act as an advisory council and are being trained to help her fulfill her monitoring role. She solicited the views of these children on the topic of children in faith settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three children from different faith communities responded to her questions.

Is there a space for children's voice in faith settings?

Ms J (16) Like nobody would ever really ask a child what they would like the message to be about, what they would like to see in church or what they would like to sing. It's like you come into a service and everything is just handed to you and I think that is why most children cannot sit still in a church.

Ms A (17) At my church children are mostly separated from adults. I don't think they have a voice at church, it is mostly the elderly or the preacher that do

Mr D (15) In the mosque, we listen to what religious leaders (Imam) say, do our prayers and listen to the Imam sermon, then go home.

- Children are aware of power hierarchies in faith institutions
- Elders, adults, leaders are ahead of children in that hierarchy
- Children's voices are silenced by perceptions / exercising of power

How can we promote children's voice?

Ms J (16) Allow certain services to be taken by the children... cause in this way you are allowing them to reach out to their peers. Churches should allow team building activities (to) know how to bond or build with one another. This is why most kids don't come because they don't have friends or nobody understands them.'

Ms A (17) Well my church is more of an African strict type of church. We wear dresses and long skirts. I'd like to see it more free and allows people to dress how they like in other words adapt into the new change and not necessarily be that strict.

Elderlies at church believe children should respect the elderlies and should obey (them). But I feel like it is actually fine for them not to listen to children. So its hard for children to stand up. There is a (radio) show on Umhlobo Wene on Sunday morning when kids share their Bible verses and the lady asks questions on how do they feel and what challenges do they face in the modern days. Then after that she tries to make the elderly people understand it more. I think they do listen from that programme a lot. She tries to teach the elderly people how to respect children and for children to respect elderlies.

Mr D (15 The prophet said children should be love(d) and protected. The prophet never used to hit his children, he believed in talking to them.

- Faith institutions provide an important space of belonging and bonding
- Younger people cannot necessarily question traditions in the faith institutions
- Children could be consulted on the content of faith meetings
- Children can contribute and lead faith meetings

What did faith communities do during the COVID 19 pandemic?

Ms J (16) I think that during this time so many people forgot to pray and ask God for guidance, even though the church is a pillar, in this time it became just another building. And it's not a bad thing, because the spirit of God moves, it has no fixed destination. The church

The Sunday School has been making special videos and has been sending services and lessons through social media.

Ms A (17) Well they sent out food parcels to struggling church members, and masks. They also sent small verses on Whatsapp group chats

Mr D (15 The prophet said children should be love(d) and protected. The prophet never used to hit his children, he believed in talking to them.

I personally think that it was the right decision to keep the mosque closed as Muslims, when they pray, we need to stand shoulder to shoulder and no spaces must be between people. There will be no social distancing if this should not be applied. This is the right decision that the MJC has decided.

They send messages and kept the sermons that happened during Jumuah in mosque, it was broadcasted over the radio. It was alive on Facebook also.

- Children recognise the spiritual value of faith communities and institutions beyond the physical construction of buildings for gatherings
- Technology was used more widely for communication (children are naturals in this space)
- Faith institutions played a role to alleviate hunger and provide personal protective equipment

Conclusion

The Commissioner for Children is privileged to be entrusted with sharing the views of children in public forums. However, giving 'voice' means that children feel comfortable to represent their own views without fear of reprisal. More efforts are needed to build trust relationships between adults and children, especially adult leaders in faith institutions. This would require authenticity and a willingness to deconstruct power dynamics. It is important that children are seen and heard in our society.