

A rustic wooden table with a large loaf of bread and a glass of red wine. The bread is broken open, and the wine is dark red. The text is overlaid on the image.

USER'S GUIDE

WELCOMING CHILDREN TO THE LORD'S SUPPER

Toolkit



Christian Reformed Church
**Faith Formation
Ministries**

crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits

**“ TAKE, EAT,
REMEMBER,
AND BELIEVE... ”**



The brochure you're holding is a user's guide to the online *Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper* toolkit.

Open the toolkit at crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits. Inside you'll find a collection of resources your church can use, whether you've been welcoming children to the Lord's table for a long time or are just beginning to explore what it might mean for your church.

In the online toolkit you'll find the following:

- * **FAQs**
- * **Pathways:** videos and stories from CRC churches who have opened the table to children
- * **Family resources:** tools for talking with children about the Lord's Supper at home
- * **Educational resources:** intergenerational events, children's ministry/Sunday school sessions, courses on communion, and more
- * **Worship resources:** ideas for enhancing children's participation in the Lord's Supper

About Our Toolkits

The *Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper* toolkit is one of several toolkits created and designed by the Faith Formation Ministries team in collaboration with CRC church leaders for CRC church leaders. Our toolkit resources are gathered from real-life church practices, from online sources, and from published materials.

As new tools become available, we'll add them to the online toolkit. If there's a tool you need but can't find or if you have an idea to contribute, let us know! You can contact us at faithformation@crcna.org.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP! For assistance with faith formation challenges in your church, contact one of our Regional Catalyzers at crcna.org/FaithFormation/coaching.



Visit the *Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper* toolkit at crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits.

BELONGING AND RESPONDING

*The Spiritual
Development of
Children and Their
Participation in the
Lord's Supper*

BY ROBERT J. KEELEY


I recently became a grandfather, and I have enjoyed watching my granddaughter, Joanna, grow and change. At eight weeks old she is already able to do things she could not do just a few weeks ago. She is recognizing people—like me—smiling, and starting to control parts of her body. She will soon learn to reach for things instead of making random arm movements. She will learn to sit up without help. She will learn to crawl and walk. It seems as if

I can almost see her grow and change as I watch.

Last night she was fussy. So after making sure she was well fed and had a clean diaper, I walked with her, holding her in my arms and singing to her. She looked at me, smiled, and quieted down. After a little while she fell asleep.

What Joanna experienced was a sense of calm and security. She doesn't have the cognitive tools yet to know that as love. She is just enjoying being loved and,





I would contend, loving me back in return. She does not understand what a hug is, but soon she will hug me back—even before she can explain what a hug is, why it feels good, or why she is compelled to do it.

A relationship with God begins much the same way. God loves us, and we respond. We don't need to have a lot of cognitive awareness at first; we can simply respond to the love we feel from God. We know that it is God that we are sensing because we hear about God from our parents and we begin to recognize God in our life. We really don't think about it, though. God is simply there, in the same way that our parents are there.

Just as my granddaughter gladly receives a loving hug from me, children are able to receive and respond to God's love before they can even understand or articulate the meaning of love. In a similar way, children are able to accept God's love and respond to it through their participation in the Lord's Supper. And, just like adults, their understanding of and appreciation for the Lord's Supper becomes deeper and richer as they grow.

Robert J. Keeley serves as a professor of education at Calvin College and of discipleship and faith formation at Calvin Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Laura, are co-directors of children's ministries at 14th Street CRC in Holland, Mich.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE SMELLY

Communion Blessings for Children

BY KAREN DEBOER

Karen Deboer serves as a creative resource developer for Faith Formation Ministries and attends The Journey church in Kitchener, Ontario.

I was once asked on a Sunday morning if I could serve the juice for communion when we celebrated the Lord's Supper later during our worship service. It was suggested that I say "The blood of Christ was given for you" to each person as they came forward to receive the juice I would be holding. My assigned partner, who would be serving the bread of communion alongside me, was to say, "The body of Christ was broken for you." Not wanting to mess up the words of the blessing I would say, I thought about it a lot during the service. In fact, I probably thought about it too much, because when I finally stood beside my assigned partner as he served the bread and heard him combine both of our assigned lines into one sentence—"The body and the blood of Christ was given for you"—my mind went blank.

All I could think to do was to provide each person with what I hoped would be perceived as a contemplative nod and warm smile as they reached for the bread and then the juice, occasionally including their name or a short greeting: "John" (nod, smile), "Hello" (nod, smile), "For you" (nod, smile). Then a child appeared in the lineup in front of me, and, as I bent down, looked into his eyes, and held the juice tray toward him, my brain finally kicked back into gear. "Jesus loves you, Michael," I whispered to him. "Jesus loves you," I said to every person thereafter.

Given my awkward encounter as a communion server, I wasn't surprised to hear about the experiences with Lord's Supper blessings that a

group of boys in Michigan shared recently with my colleague Laura Keeley. At the top of their list of uncomfortable moments during communion: being asked a question about the Heidelberg Catechism, and having a woman “zoom in for a hug.” Noting the importance of personal space, one of the boys offered this guideline: “If I can smell you, you’re too close!”

All of this got me thinking about meaningful ways for us to bless and include children who aren’t yet fully participating in the Lord’s Supper, but are invited to come forward and receive a blessing as it is served, or who are present as the bread and juice are passed from one person to another. Happily, an informal poll of pastors yielded some wonderfully appropriate ideas, including these from Rev. Elizabeth Vander Haagen:

- * “Remember that you are God’s beloved child.”
- * “Remember that for you Jesus came, for you Jesus died, for you Jesus rose — and Jesus is in heaven praying for you.”
- * “May the Holy Spirit give you everything you need to follow Jesus.”
- * “Remember that you are God’s beloved child and when God looks on you, God smiles.”
- * “May you always know how much Jesus loves you.”

Keeping in mind the experience of the boys who spoke to Laura, I’d add that while for some children a light touch on their head or shoulder

while receiving a blessing might be okay, not everyone experiences touch the same way. So, unless you’re sure they are okay with it, keep your hands to yourself. And remember—if they smell you, you’re too close!

THE SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN

Children’s ministry leaders and volunteers often have questions like these:

- * **“Today a parent asked me, ‘What does my three-year-old understand about the Lord’s Supper?’”**
- * **“One Sunday I saw a parent slap away the hand of her child as he reached for the communion bread. How can I help her talk with her child about the Lord’s Supper?”**
- * **“At what age are children beginning to understand the symbols and metaphors in communion?”**

The **Spiritual Characteristics of Children chart** answers these questions! One of our most-viewed resources, it contains general descriptions of children at various stages along with notes about how they might experience communion at each stage. Use it with ministry leaders; get it to families. You’ll find it online at tinyurl.com/SpirChart.

10 WAYS TO CELEBRATE THE LORD'S SUPPER WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- 1 Equip families.** Help parents and caregivers have meaningful conversations with their children about the “what, why, and how” of communion.
- 2 Prepare the way.** Offer a class on the sacraments that families can attend together. Visit the *Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper* toolkit for resources that other congregations are using with families.
- 3 Do a practice run.** At church or at home, invite children to practice the actions that accompany the elements, such as passing a cup or tray and saying the appropriate words to their neighbor.
- 4 Reserve seats.** Encourage families with young children to sit near the front of the sanctuary for an unobstructed view of the communion table and the distribution of the elements.
- 5 Invite children to serve.** Include children in some way in the preparation and/or distribution of the elements.
- 6 Choose words carefully.** Include familiar songs with simple language and/or repeated phrases. Craft responsive readings that allow early readers to follow along and participate.
- 7 Be inclusive.** Offer a simple blessing to those who aren't yet participating: “God loves you, [*name*],” or, “Jesus came for you too, [*name*].”
- 8 Pay attention to accessibility.** If your congregation's practice is to come up front for communion, be aware of any sensory or mobility challenges that would make that practice difficult for young people with disabilities, and make necessary accommodations.
- 9 Create visuals.** Consider how you might visually add meaning to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, perhaps by inviting children to help create a special banner or bulletin cover.
- 10 Celebrate!** While there are certainly somber aspects to communion, we live in the reality of Jesus' resurrection and victory over death. Be sure that children experience the joy of participating in the Lord's Supper.

Learn More in the *Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper* Toolkit

The *Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper* toolkit is an online resource designed to help your congregation strengthen communion practices with children. You can access this toolkit and others at crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits.

For more information on how to meet faith formation challenges in your church, contact one of Faith Formation Ministries' Regional Catalyzers (crcna.org/FaithFormation/coaching).



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