

"The Children's Committee"
by George Brown, Jr.

Task

Your task as a collaborative learning group is to identify three to five elements from this case you believe are central to empowering adults.

Process

1. Read the case carefully, noting questions and insights.
2. After everyone has had an opportunity to read the case, in dyads or triads, analyze the case. What behaviors, practices, or attitudes seemed empowering? (Refer to line numbers.)
3. Within your collaborative learning group, seek consensus on the three to five *most important* elements that seemed to empower others. Have a spokesperson ready to report the group's findings to the whole workshop.

The Case

- 1 Central Church has been described as "a downtown church with a suburban membership."
2 Over the years, this seven hundred member Midwestern congregation developed an excellent
3 Christian education program. Central Church was known as a church that did a good job of
4 nurturing children in Christian faith.
5
6 The Children's Committee was responsible for children's ministries at Central Church. The
7 committee had nine members, and was resourced by an associate minister who served as the
8 Minister of Christian Education. The committee had nine members who served staggered-three
9 year terms. In time, this committee that had difficulty recruiting new members soon had a
10 waiting list of people wanting to serve.
11
12 Most of the time, all the committee members were mothers. Their children were representative
13 of the broad span of ages of the children in the church's Christian education program, from
14 infants to sixth graders. The women were well educated; most had a college degree. From
15 time to time, there were members who had been education majors in college. One member had
16 a Master's degree in education. Only a few worked outside the home, and for the most part
17 those who did were part-time. Each year, three members left the committee and three new
18 members joined.
19
20 The monthly meetings of the committee followed a consistent pattern. After dropping off young
21 children in a nursery room staffed by a paid childcare person, committee members enjoyed
22 home-made refreshments that one of them had been assigned to bring. Then one of the
23 members led the committee in worship, which usually consisted of a reading from the Bible or
24 devotional book, a brief meditation, and a prayer.
25
26 In the beginning, the minister of Christian education was called on to lead opening worship
27 because none of the committee members felt comfortable leading worship. The minister of
28 Christian education did this for a little while before encouraging some of the committee
29 members to take responsibility for leading worship. At first they borrowed ready-to-use
30 devotions from books in the church library. As they gained confidence, several members began
31 to develop a worship focus on their own, writing their own prayers and meditations based on a
32 passage from Scripture.

33 The first twenty to thirty minutes of each monthly meeting were devoted to discussing a chapter
34 or two from a book that the committee had agreed to study for the year. Books covered
35 subjects ranging from the moral development of children and educational philosophy to theology
36 and teaching methods. Authors included Sofia Caveletti, James Fowler, and John Westerhoff.
37 Usually, the minister of Christian education presented three or four books from which the
38 committee chose one to study for the year.

39
40 Following the study period, the focus shifted to the business portion of the meeting. The
41 chairperson asked if there were any corrections to be made to the minutes of the previous
42 meeting and reviewed the printed agenda for the meeting to see if there were any additions to
43 make. The meeting then followed the list of items on the printed agenda.

44
45 It was not uncommon for the morning's discussion of the study book to spill over into the
46 business part of the meeting. When the committee was reading *Starchild*, a book by Dennis
47 Benson and Stan Stewart written especially for the international "Year of the Child" celebration,
48 one committee member noted how the chapter about Baptism in another church had led her to
49 compare how the sacrament was celebrated at Central Church with how it was celebrated by
50 the church in the chapter from *Starchild*. As others began to identify elements in the chapter
51 they felt were significant, the discussion moved in the direction of a recommendation to the
52 Worship Council at Central Church. The Children's Committee formulated a proposal calling for
53 some changes in the way Central Church celebrated the sacrament. Study began to inform and
54 transform the work of the committee.

55
56 Gradually, the committee's work began to be more visible in the life of the church. Once when a
57 policy linking children's participation as acolytes to membership in the children's choir was being
58 proposed for adoption by Consistory, the Children's Committee mounted a vigorous campaign
59 to defeat the proposal because it prevented children from exercising their spiritual gifts in the life
60 of the congregation. Another time, having observed that children were running around without
61 much adult supervision prior to the mid-week fellowship meal, the Children's Committee
62 developed a series of special activities for children that kept them occupied until dinner was
63 served.

64
65 Committee members frequently saw immediate results from their monthly meetings. A
66 recommendation adopted at the February meeting was often implemented and reported back to
67 the committee by March or April. The Children's Committee soon gained the reputation as "a
68 committee that got things done."

69
70 Members understood this to be a working committee, where everyone was expected to pitch in
71 and make a contribution to the committee's ministry with children. At the organizational meeting
72 each fall, when new members joined the committee, the chairperson gave a speech about
73 responsibility and the expectations for committee members' participation. There was a time
74 when the Minister of Christian education who met with them gave this welcoming speech that
75 set expectations. But it wasn't long before the chairperson took responsibility for orienting new
76 committee members.

77
78 Someone once observed that during a particular period in the life of the church one-third of the
79 fifteen-member Board of Deacons of Central Church were all either present or past members of
80 the Children's Committee.