

1 WHY INCLUDE CHILDREN IN WORSHIP

Worship in the Christian church usually has an adult orientation. It is created by adults for adults, although children may occasionally participate as choir members, acolytes, or other helpers. Nevertheless, the spoken Word and the words of the hymns and the worship service seldom use the average child's vocabulary, sentence structure, images, and life experiences.

The question to be asked by all congregations is whether children should be included, excluded, or simply disregarded in the act of corporate worship. The question exists whether or not we verbalize it. It is often answered by default—by continuing practices with which the adult membership is familiar and comfortable but which seldom relate to the experience level of children.

Including Children in Worship has been prepared after much thought, observation, experience, prayer, and research. It assumes that when we baptize or dedicate a child into the family of God, that child has a meaningful place in what that family does as a group, including worship. Another underlying assumption is that people of all ages belong in the worshipping community. Children should be involved in worship with adults because the church follows Jesus Christ, assumes responsibility for children at their dedication or baptism, and is designed as a covenant community. Surely children, as God's creation, are part of that community. How, then, do they experience this community? How do they perceive it? How do adult members of the congregation carry out the promises made at the baptism or dedication service?

This book supports the belief that children do belong in the congregational worship setting as full and participating members of that community at worship: children do want to worship.

A mother told the story of her five-year-old who challenged the pastor occasionally on their way out of church. One Sunday, it was: "Why didn't

you pray for my friend who is in the hospital?" Another Sunday, it was: "Did you mean the angels in heaven or the Los Angeles Angels?" Children do listen.

Children are learners. Adults, too, are learners and can learn even from children. Children belong in the worship service as ministers, a true part of the priesthood of believers who can also enrich the learning of parents and other adults as they worship. Those who do not have children especially need to observe them, even when their behavior is distracting. Children can show us what it means to become "as a little child." Children may be dependent, but they can also be loyal, amazingly honest, spontaneous, eager, and completely involved. We see in them how childlike characteristics can be put into action. They show us our need to continue the journey of faith.

Children are learners. The questions need to be asked: What are children learning during the worship service that will support faith development? What do children learn about themselves, about the world, about the church, and about God in the worship setting? How will this be reflected in their adult faith—or lack of faith? If children belong in worship, how do we include them in a way that affirms who they are and how God made them to be?

Some congregations provide a separate children's church-time program for young children. Such programs might offer opportunities for worship that are appropriate to the children's level of development through creative teaching methods, such as drama, puppets, and music. A separate children's church-time might enable parents to participate more completely in the adult worship experience. But the separate children's church-time divides the family—and the congregation—as a worshipping group. Adults might develop an attitude that keeps children in their separate place so that adults are not distracted from their worship. Although it may

be unintentional, such programs can become simply babysitting for the convenience of adults and worship leaders.

A church's worship committee was considering what to do with children in worship. Children usually stayed with the congregation until just before the sermon. Then the children left the sanctuary for their own group time. Recruiting leadership and finding curriculum that was easy to prepare for this "children's church" became problems. Adults were "too busy" to commit to a role that would take them away from the main worship service on a regular basis. And most curriculum materials seemed more like Sunday school curriculum. Was "children's church" to be an educational experience or a scaled-down version of adult church?

The worship committee discussion went something like this: "What curriculum should we use? Extended Sunday school lessons? Games and puppets? Bible stories? Free choice of arts and crafts and table games?"

"We should select curriculum based on the goals for children's church. But what are the goals for children's church?"

"The goal should be to help children learn how to worship."

"Are games and puppets worship? Is children's church really worship at the children's level, whatever their level is?"

"Why shouldn't children attend congregational worship? Couldn't they attend 'big church' to worship with their families? Wouldn't they learn from observing adults at worship? Why is children's church separated from 'big church'?"

"Children's church allows adults to worship quietly and without disturbance. The pastor doesn't want his sermon interrupted."

"How do children learn to worship? By learning to sit still? Is sitting still worship?"

"But, can children worship?"

"What is worship, anyway?"

The last question is really the starting point. Leaders should be clear about worship itself before considering the role of children in worship.

Worship is a community action in which adults and children can participate. The message of the

gospel suggests that the good news is for all ages. The church includes persons of all ages, and God seeks and accepts worship from young and old alike.

Christian education and worship are closely related: worship leads us to, and is supported by, the programs of Christian education. In worship, we praise and adore God. To communicate fully with God, we soon want and need to learn more about God. In education, we learn about who God is and about God's purpose for humankind. As we understand more, we worship God even more deeply.

Adults who guide worship experiences can develop many opportunities to include children in the worshiping congregation. Involvement in corporate worship will give children another opportunity to discover answers to their questions, such as: Why do you think God hears us pray? Why is the Bible difficult to understand? Who made God? These are profound and important questions. Children deserve to be taken seriously and incorporated into the worshiping community. When the worship leaders communicate about faith in language suitable for children, they model conversation that parents can use at home.

Pastors and staff in small and large churches, as well as members of boards or committees for education and worship, are looking for creative ways to involve worshipers in response to God. When a congregation is composed of individuals of all ages, this can challenge even the most creative and dedicated worship leaders.

This book is developed in order to give pastors and others involved in planning congregational worship some suggestions and guidelines for including young children in worship experiences. Here we propose to examine what our approach to worshiping with children can be; how to plan for congregational worship to account for the ways children think and develop; and some very practical, concrete ways that have been used successfully to include children in worship.

For purposes of this resource, the word *children* will be defined as including youngsters between birth and eight years of age, and most of the material is focused on including these children in congregational worship. This book includes some suggestions for involving older children and youth as well.

When children see people of a variety of ages involved in worship, they will actually experience how worship can include everyone, that everyone can worship, and that God seeks praise from all persons. Young children and adults need to participate in worship with people of all ages, with all types of learning styles, with all sorts of self-expression, and with all kinds of talents and abilities. God seeks worship and praise from everyone.

Let us here acknowledge two important points: first, the role of the pastor and, second, the young child's need for movement.

The pastor's role is critical in planning worship that involves all ages as participants in praising God. It is the pastor who can coordinate all the elements of worship so that adults and children are actually lifting their praises to God, rather than forming an audience for a "program." Pastors and worship leaders must be theologically responsible. The material presented in this resource is intended to enhance the worship experience, to encourage people of all ages to praise God, and to build the community of faith.

Secondly, young children do need movement. Members of the congregation will want to be realistic about the amount of activity that can be

tolerated in the sanctuary pews. However, it may be this very characteristic that children can contribute to the corporate worship experience. The Bible describes worship in physical terms: standing, kneeling, lifting hands, lifting the head, clapping hands, dancing, lying down, wearing sackcloth. These all can reflect and encourage an attitude of praise and worship. These are all positions that children will enthusiastically try. Furthermore, allowing children freedom of movement just might release their natural gifts for ministry. Dennis Benson and Stan Stewart tell this story:

"As I ponderously launched into my third point, a small toddler left his parents in a pew toward the back and made his way down the aisle. At the fourth row from the front he paused, turned, and climbed on the seat. He sat there beside her [a woman who had just learned that she had cancer]. I don't think he said anything, just snuggled in. Her arm encircled him. He responded with a hug. He sat with her for only a minute or so, and then he went back to his parents. But, my God, her face! I saw it. Warmth and hope once again lived in her eyes, courage shone in her bearing. She had received her gospel for the day" (Benson and Stewart 1978, 30).

STATEMENTS OF BELIEF ABOUT INCLUDING CHILDREN IN WORSHIP

The statements that follow have been developed in order to assist church leaders in articulating their own beliefs about their worshipping congregations. The statements might be used to start discussion about worship in general or about including children in particular or used to develop a brochure that describes to members and visitors the congregation's emphasis on including children in worship.

Children of any age are welcome in our congregational worship services as participants with others of all ages.

We include children in our congregational worship services because we are members of the *ekklesia*, the corporate body of Jesus Christ. We want to model God's design for a community where differences are accepted and affirmed and where individuals feel they belong.

We include children in our congregational worship services because we follow Jesus Christ, who welcomed and fully accepted little children. We want to help children know that we, too, accept them as they are and that they can realize through experience the potential they have as children of God.

We include children in our congregational worship services because we follow Jesus Christ, who directed his followers to learn from children. We need to have children

with us in order to observe and learn the qualities that Jesus Christ desired for his followers.

We include children in our congregational worship services because we believe in God, who directed believers to lead children. We need to have children with us in order for them to learn from the experiences of worship with the community of faith.

Therefore,

We will periodically review and reaffirm the value we place on the presence of children in our worshiping congregation.

We will establish a worship committee that will facilitate worship services in which people of all ages participate.

We will consciously invite children to join congregational worship services. We will schedule congregational worship separate from educational opportunities. We want the church family to worship together.

We will support parents in their role as their children's first and most important teachers about worship.

We will educate children about worship through the church's educational programs and, most importantly, through their experiences in congregational worship.

We will intentionally educate adults about worship through the church's educational programs and, most importantly, through their experiences in congregational worship.