

## Worship: The Work of Everyone

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Worship is the central act of a gathered community of the people of God, and, as the Directory for Worship states, “the work of everyone” (W-1.4003). This “work” involves singing, praising, praying, touching, listening, giving, and departing to serve. Worship is central to faith and “everyone” includes children. Children, by virtue of being baptized, are members of the family of God. They belong to the fellowship as persons loved by God. They are to be respected as persons. They are valued for who they are and not for the adults they will become. As church family members, children need to be included in worship from an early age.

Children of any age can worship. They may not worship in the same way or at the same cognitive level as adults, but they still worship. Fortunately, being a Christian is not entirely a cognitive matter. It is also a matter of affections, symbols, story, and mystery. Most of us became Christians not by thinking about the faith and making rational decisions about Christ, but rather by watching our elders and then growing into faith in a natural way, the way we inherited most of our important values.<sup>1</sup>

Worship, then, is also one of the means by which the church passes on its beliefs and practices. Children and youth participate their way into faith. They form their identities as Christians unconsciously, through the liturgy (work) of the worship in which they participate. Understanding starts at the level of impression and awareness, and experience precedes rational understanding, so children are learning whether or not they are able to verbalize that learning. Children learn the feelings, postures, gestures, attitudes, and words of worship by observing and imitating adults. As with all spiritual disciplines, worship takes practice—a great deal of practice. Children will learn to worship and to value worship by participating in the worship experience on a regular basis. *Children learn to worship by worshipping.*

The primary responsibility for seeing that children are included in worship rests with the pastor and the church’s governing body.

In setting an order for worship on the Lord’s Day, the pastor with the concurrence of the session shall provide opportunity for the people from youngest to oldest to participate in a worthy offering of praise to God and for them to hear and to respond to God’s Word (Directory for Worship, W-3.3201).

The central occasion for nurture in the church is the Service for the Lord's Day, when the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments are celebrated. All members of the community, from oldest to youngest, are encouraged to be present and to participate. Educational activities should not be scheduled which prevent regular participation in this service (Directory for Worship, W-6.2006). Beyond these reasons for including children in worship is the contribution that children make to the community's worship experience.

Children bring special gifts to worship and grow in the faith through their regular inclusion and participation in the worship of the congregation. Those responsible for planning and leading the participation of children in worship should consider the children's level of understanding and ability to respond, and should avoid both excessive formality and condescension (Directory for Worship, W-3.1004).

Children indeed have unique gifts to offer the receptive congregation. These include:

- a reminder of the vows adults make during the sacrament of baptism
- a spontaneity that provokes smiles, demands flexibility, and adds spice to community life
- an ability to see things as they really are
- an alternative (other than adult) view of the world
- an openness to God and a freshness in celebrating God's love
- a propensity for using all the senses and a model for multisensory worship
- unhesitating faith
- a willingness to ask questions that make all of us think seriously about faith
- their presence, especially for those who do not have children in their daily lives
- vulnerability
- challenges to established beliefs, activities, and models of living out the faith
- genuine smiles

### **Ways to Include Children in Congregational Worship**

Among the ways to include children in congregational worship are those in which they can actively participate, such as to:

Have also.  
Fill this  
role

- serve as greeter with an adult partner
- hand out children's bulletins or other items to be used in worship
- serve as an acolyte
- carry in the Bible during the procession
- sing in the children's choir
- help teach the congregation a new hymn or movements to a familiar song
- carry in the communion bread
- interpret a call to worship, Scripture reading, or song through movement
- read Scripture
- compose a litany
- lead a litany
- participate in the moment with children
- design bulletin covers
- bring in an offering of canned goods for hunger relief or other items for disaster relief
- play a musical instrument
- participate in the passing of the peace
- make and present a banner
- make and/or present a gift to parents of a newly baptized baby
- make a tablecloth for the Communion table
- take up the offering

For many congregations, the moment with children or children's sermon is the primary way that children are included in congregation. This practice has come under scrutiny in recent years. Below is a partial list of the positive and negative aspects of having children's sermons.

#### The Children's Sermon: The Positive Side

- provides an opportunity to affirm, in a variety of ways, children's importance to God
- helps integrate children into the ritual life of the community
- provides the opportunity for proclamation in age-appropriate language
- reminds adults that they, too, are dependent children of a loving God
- provides a visual reminder to the congregation of its responsibility to children
- when delivered by the pastor, affirms the pastor's care for and interest in children

- provides tangible expression of the willingness of the adult leaders to meet the children at their level of understanding
- transmits the traditions and values of the community

### The Children's Sermon: The Negative Side

- while conveying the important place children hold in the church, it may also suggest to children that they are not like the rest of the congregation

Any process within the context of worship that singles out a particular group for special recognition or attention endangers the ability to remain an intentionally inclusive and whole community.<sup>2</sup>

- \* does little to assist children in getting through the remainder of an adult-focused service
- provides time for children to have the full attention of the pastor, but many pastors are not comfortable in this setting
- provides a poor substitute for a relationship with the pastor and integration into community life<sup>3</sup>
- \* often more appreciated by adults as "entertainment" than by children, who can sense when they are being used; instead they should be treated with respect, and never exploited, manipulated, or patronized
- contains messages often too abstract for children to understand and not related to children's experiences; for example, the ever popular "object lesson" generally requires the children to make a mental leap from the concrete object to an abstract concept, which is a cognitive function that younger children have not yet developed
- implies that the other sermon and the rest of worship are relevant only for adults

Worship is more than preaching. Scripture is read, heard, responded to, sung, prayed, acted out, shared, and experienced by persons in different ways. It is important to remember that "enthusiasm in worship, overt expressions of moods, treatment of others, postures and gestures in worship, and even the preaching event . . . are observable and can be imitated."<sup>4</sup>

### Scripture Reading, Preaching, and Children

Sermon time is the most problematic time for parents and children. Whatever is done to encourage children will also assist worshipers of all ages. Below are listed suggestions for helping children hear Scripture readings and sermons.<sup>5</sup>

### *Scripture readings*

- offer a prayer for illumination prior to reading
- establish the context for the passage prior to reading, setting the scene and inviting listeners into it
- have members of the congregation, including children, serve as liturgists
- read Scripture as a litany
- read the passage so as to convey its dramatic or emotional character
- engage several voices when the passage has more than one character
- read from a translation that most clearly presents the Scripture selection
- show an object that is featured in the text such as a plumb line or potter's clay

### *Sermons*

- use props or familiar objects when appropriate
- define and illustrate "big words"
- guide the listeners by indicating ways to follow the sermon and summarizing frequently
- use questions, illustrations, and examples from the lives of children and youth as well as adults
- present some insights from a child's viewpoint
- become familiar with children's literature, music, and films and when appropriate include them in the sermon
- address children from time to time
- use images, metaphors, and analogies
- use humor appropriately
- strive for seventeen-minute sermons
- remember that the need to shift in the pew is not age-specific<sup>6</sup>

Worship is enriched for all when the use of all the senses is increased and the body is actively engaged. Children teach us that when we get stuck in one medium, such as the spoken word, attention drifts. A mix of focal points, movement, music, and symbols will help all worshippers to focus on the object of our worship—God. It is important

to admit that adults rarely get through a full-length liturgy without lapses in attention. Adults become inattentive from time to time, staring into space, leafing through the bulletin, mentally (or physically) making a list of things to be done, or closing our eyes for a while. Children have not yet learned such socially acceptable ways of checking out, so they express their inattention more noticeably.

### **Barriers to Full Participation of Children in Worship**

There are a number of practices and perspectives that prevent children's full participation in congregational worship. Many of these are unconscious and, once noted, can be adjusted to the benefit of children and the entire congregation. Below is a list of common barriers to children's full participation in worship.

- scheduling worship and education simultaneously—regardless of the reasons, the result is that adults worship, children attend church school, and neither receives the full experience of worship and education; each group is also deprived of the gifts, insights, and wisdom the others have to share
- viewing worship as entertainment and the worship leaders as performers
- failing to educate the worshipers (all ages) about what worship is and how expectations shape the worship experience
- assuming that children are so different from adults that they cannot “get” anything from the worship experience
- presuming that it is too difficult to preach effectively to the wide range of ages represented by the gathered community
- neglecting parenting responsibilities during worship—this is an important time for parents to help children learn to worship and experience the presence of God (which goes beyond admonitions to sit still and includes helping with hymnbooks and encouraging participation)

### **Education as Preparation for Participation in Worship**

Preparation for active participation in worship is an important part of the congregation's educational ministry with children, parents, and persons of all ages.

In the exercise of its responsibility to encourage participation of its people in worship, the session should provide for education in Christian worship by means appropriate to the age, interests, and circumstances of the members of the congregation (Directory for Worship, W-1.4007).

Worship has its own vocabulary, practices, rhythms, and forms of expression. Teaching persons of all ages about these terms, practices, rhythms, and expressions is one of the most important ways to nurture effective participation in worship. Through age-appropriate educational experiences, children's readiness for and capacity to take part in the various parts of the worship service can be heightened. Including parents in these educational endeavors can greatly enrich them as matters of the faith are mutually explored and relationships are deepened. It is important to remember that increasing understanding of anything takes time for anyone. A child doesn't learn to walk or to play an instrument or a sport in a day. It takes practice, participation, patience, and repetition. The same is true of worshiping.

## NOTES

1. William H. Willimon, *Preaching and Leading Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 23–24.

2. W. Alan Smith, *Children Belong in Worship: A Guide to the Children's Sermon* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1984), 55.

3. Margie Morris, in *Helping Children Feel at Home in Church* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1988), points out that "if every child who attends worship has a chance to get to know the pastor at other times, or if children are so naturally integrated into the service as leaders and participants that they intrinsically know their worth in the Christian community, we could dispense with a special time set aside for children" (p. 58).

4. Gobel, A. Roger, and Phillip C. Huber. *Creative Designs with Children at Worship* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 14.

5. Adapted from Carolyn Brown, *You Can Preach to the Kids, Too! Designing Sermons for Adults and Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 45–56, and from David Ng, "Encouraging Children to Hear the Word of God," in *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, XXV, 1, Winter 1992, published by the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 26–27.

6. See note 5.

## RESOURCES

### Children and Worship

*The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2001).

- Brown, Carolyn C. *Gateways to Worship: A Year of Worship Experiences for Young Children*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Forbid Them Not: Involving Children in Sunday Worship*. (Based on the Common Lectionary, Year A). Nashville: Abingdon, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Forbid Them Not: Involving Children in Sunday Worship*. (Based on the Common Lectionary, Year B). Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Forbid Them Not: Involving Children in Sunday Worship*. (Based on the Common Lectionary, Year C). Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *You Can Preach to the Kids, Too! Designing Sermons for Adults and Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).
- Caldwell, Elizabeth Francis. *Come Unto Me, Rethinking the Sacraments for Children* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996).
- Castleman, Robbie. *Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
- Dawn, Marva J. *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).
- Duckert, Mary. *New Kid in the Pew: Shared Ministry with Children* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991).
- Henderson, Dorothy. *45 Ways to Involve Children in Worship* (Ontario: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997).
- Juengst, Sara Covin. *Sharing Faith with Children: Rethinking the Children's Sermon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).
- Morris, Margie *Helping Children Feel at Home in Church*. Rev. ed. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1997).
- Sandell, Elizabeth J. *Including Children in Worship: A Planning Guide for Congregations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991).
- Smith, W. Alan. *Children Belong in Worship: A Guide to the Children's Sermon* (St. Louis: CSP Press, 1984).
- Witvliet, John D., ed. *A Child Shall Lead Them: Children in Worship* (Garland, TX: Choristers Guild, 1999).

#### Children's Books

- Boling, Ruth, Lauren J. Muzzy, and Laurie A. Vance. *A Children's Guide to Worship* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1997).
- Getty-Sullivan, Mary Ann. *God Speaks to Us in Water Stories* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *God Speaks to Us in Feeding Stories* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997).
- Grimes, Nikki. *Come Sunday*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).
- Ramshaw, Gail. *Sunday Morning*. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Everyday and Sunday, Too*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1997).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *1-2-3 Church*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1997).

### Worship Education Resources for Adults

Chapman, Dean W. *How to Worship as a Presbyterian*. (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001). Explores the implications of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and discusses the worshiper's role in prayer, music, the reading and exposition of Scripture, the offering, and the Lord's Supper. Discussion questions are provided.

Hough, Debbie and Mary Emery Speedy. *Children in the Sanctuary: Involving Children Fully in the Worship Life of a Congregation* (Published for the Presbyterian and Reformed Educational Partnership by Church Leader Support, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, KY, 2002). Looks at the participation of children in worship—the opportunities and challenges. The study guide can be ordered with an accompanying video or DVD.

Kline, C. Benton. *A Study Guide for the Directory for Worship*. (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1990). Written to help acquaint congregations with the Directory for Worship and to guide them in its use in the life of the church.

Noren, Carol M. *What Happens Sunday Morning: A Layperson's Guide to Worship*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). Raises consciousness about what we do in worship and why we do it.

### Models for Worship Education with Children and Their Families

Brown, Carolyn C. *Gateways to Worship, A Year of Worship Experiences for Young Children*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989). Provides 52 session plans for introducing kindergartners and first-graders to worship.

○ Lou, Sue, Jean Floyd Love, Mickey Myers, and Sylvia Washer. *Get Ready! Get Set! Worship!* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999). Provides 4 study sessions for adults and a number of models for helping children and parents explore and deepen their understanding of worship, baptism, and communion. Learning center designs and games are included.

\* Norton, Mary Jane Pierce. *Children 'Worship!* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1997). Provides 13 sessions focusing on the 6 actions of worship, reproducible bulletin inserts, sample letters to parents and suggestions for church-wide study on children and worship.

\* Stewart, Sonja M., and Jerome W. Berryman. *Young Children and Worship*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989). Provides a way to introduce children ages 3–7 to the meaning and actions of corporate worship in a sensorimotor way. Approach is based on the Montessori method.