

## Worship for All God's People

The call to worship is addressed to all.

Worship is the central act of the gathered community of God. It is something the people of God do in response to God and God's acts of love on our behalf. Through worship, people attend to the presence of God in their lives. Our *Book of Order* (W-1.4.003) expresses it this way: "In Jesus Christ, the Church is a royal priesthood in which worship is the work of everyone. The people of God are called to participate in the common ministry of worship. No one shall be excluded from participation or leadership in public worship in the Lord's house on the grounds of race, color, class, age, sex, or handicapping condition."

The worship experience is essential for the formation of identity as people of God. John Westerhoff has alerted us to the fact that it is through worship that the church passes on its understandings and its ways. In fact, Westerhoff makes a number of bold affirmations about the essential importance of including children in worship:

- If our children are to have faith, they must worship with us.
- Not only is the content of our faith communicated but also the feelings, subtle nuances, and transcendent meanings are learned through participation.

Carolyn Hardin Englehardt, director of the Paul Vieth Resource Center at Yale Divinity School, says that the reason worship is so important is that, "one participates his or her way into the faith community. One is shaped by the liturgy in which one participates. One is shaped without necessarily knowing it and without necessarily being able to explain what is happening. No other aspect of the life of the congregation can provide this experience of being formed into the community of faith." The *Book of Order* states, "The life of the Christian flows from the worship of the church, where identity as a believer is confirmed and where one is commissioned to a life of discipleship and of personal response to God" (W-5.1001).

Children are, by their baptism, members of the people of God. Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with the Church. Baptism signifies adoption into the covenant family of the Church (W-2.3004).

In *The Public Worship of God* Henry Sloane Coffin affirms, "Worship is the offering to God of the entire congregation of his people, and children should certainly be included. A childless congregation presents an abnormal and unpromising appearance."

The *Book of Order* (W-3.1004) speaks to the inclusion of children:

"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

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avoid both excessive formality and condescension.”

The guidance offered in the *Book of Order* (W-3.3201) for the ordering of worship is:

“In setting an order of worship on the Lord’s Day, the pastor with the concurrence of the session shall provide opportunity for 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.”

Lucie Barber in *Religious Education of Preschoolers* supports this emphasis on the inclusion of children by saying, “The worship service is where faithing is experienced. Children must have the opportunity to function side by side with adults in the worshiping community if they are to realize their gifts as members of the body.”

Children learn to value corporate worship only by being a part of inclusive worship on a regular basis. Children model adults. By observing parents and others at worship, children learn words, attitudes, postures, and feelings of the community. Worship is the great ritual of our faith, and as such is powerful in shaping our lives.

The key role of parents is noted in paragraph W-5.7002 of the *Book of Order*:

“The parent(s) or the one(s) exercising parental responsibility should teach their children about Christian worship by example, by providing for household worship, and by discussion and instruction. . . .”

So we affirm: Children learn to worship by worshipping.

The Church affirms: Worship can be and should be nurtured by education.

The *Book of Order* has some clear instructions about the importance of education:

W-1.4007: “In the exercise of its responsibility to encourage the 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.”

W-3.1004: “The session should insure that regular programs of the church do not prevent children’s full participation with the whole congregation in worship, in Word and Sacrament, on the Lord’s Day.”

W-6.2006: “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.”