

# Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

## Worship That Is Friendly to Children - Part 1

Though there are many voices and influences that would lead us in the direction of separating the various age groups in worship, we consider the worshipping congregation to be an intergenerational group of worshipers. As a matter of fact, the Christian church can be considered the last place in our society where intergenerational activity takes place. While the needs, experiences, and expectations of each age group can be quite different, these differences are not insurmountable.

**By:** [Howard Vanderwell](#), [Norma de Waal Malefyt](#)

**Comments:** (0)

### An Intergenerational Assembly

Though there are many voices and influences that would lead us in the direction of separating the various age groups in worship, we consider the worshipping congregation to be an intergenerational group of worshipers. As a matter of fact, the Christian church can be considered the last place in our society where intergenerational activity takes place. While the needs, experiences, and expectations of each age group can be quite different, these differences are not insurmountable.

The Scriptures give us good precedence for this practice of inclusion of all ages. When the Israelites celebrated the Passover according to God's instructions, they brought their children with them so that during the Passover Feast the children would be able to ask, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" (Exodus 12:26; 13); the parents were bound to take the inquiry as an opportunity for instruction. It is clear that a very high value among the Israelite families was the communication and worship between the generations so that one generation would learn of the deeds of the Lord from the previous generation and carry on the faith (see Psalm 78:1-8). In the New Testament we learn that Jesus went with his parents to Jerusalem for worship. In Acts and the epistles we encounter multiple references to the baptism of households. The picture is the inclusion of the family as a unit before God. In passages such as 1 John 2:12-14, we catch a glimpse of parents and children, the older and the younger, worshipping together.

True, it may take more work and effort to bridge the differences in expectation, but the benefit of intergenerational worship far outweighs the additional effort required. We aim to address some of the issues in this essay and give direction for accomplishing this worthy goal.

We suggest a list of principles such as these as worthy of your consideration for intergenerational worship:

1. Our aim is the full participation of worshipers of all ages.
2. A covenant theology embraces the children of our community as well as the adults.
3. The word of God is appropriate to all ages.
4. The call to Christian obedience comes to all ages.
5. All ages are able to function in roles of worship leadership.
6. In preparation for worship leadership roles, some will need additional assistance and coaching.
7. Music must aim to be accessible to all ages.
8. It is valuable for music to teach and draw each age into the form and expression of other ages.
9. The structure and language of the liturgy should be accessible to the mind and heart of a child, and children should be instructed in the meaning of the liturgy and its elements.

### Reexamining Our Worship

In the light of such considerations, it would be good for us all to take a closer look at the worship life of our congregation, and try to do it through the eyes of a child. A worship committee or worship planning team could greatly benefit by engaging in such an exercise together. Take a 20-30 minute period in one of your meetings to discuss the question "What do you think our worship looks like to a child?" You may even find it helpful to begin the discussion at one meeting and continue it at the next after all members have had time to reflect on the initial comments, and can perhaps consult with some children of the congregation.

Kelly Clem, a United Methodist ministry, put it this way: "Have you ever stopped to look at your church's worship from a child's perspective? From a height of three or four feet and a mind which comprehends concretely, not abstractly, your worship will appear very different. Too frequently in our churches, the Sunday morning worship service has become a 'for adults only' experience. Our language excludes children's comprehension abilities, movement of choir members and liturgists is very limited, variety is almost non-existent from week to week, and children are treated as nuisances during the worship

hour" ("Worship: For Adults Only?" in *A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship*, a Sourcebook for Christian Educators, Musicians, and Clergy; John D. Witvliet, editor; published by Choristers Guild and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship; p. 11).

In the same book, John Witvliet makes the case for the full, conscious, and active participation of children in worship. He provides five guidelines to sum up how children should participate in worship:

1. Children should participate fully, not only in special moments designed for them like a children's sermon, but in all the prayers and songs and actions that make up the worship service.
2. Children should participate consciously. They must know and understand what each action of worship means and why it is done.
3. Children should participate actively. They must not sit in passive silence; rather, children should stand, kneel, process, move, listen, speak, and—of course—sing!
4. Children should be viewed as full participants not only for their sake, but for ours. Children have gifts to give from which we need to learn: a gift of faith, a gift of questioning, a gift of wonder, as well as loyalty, honesty, and trust. Of these virtues, our children may be among the best teachers we have.
5. Children's programs should be childlike, not childish. In programming for children, we must do nothing to "dumb down" what we are doing. When we choose music and dramatic scripts that are thoughtful and well-crafted, we take our children seriously. In contrast, when we choose music and dramatic scripts that are merely fun and entertaining, we reduce our children to a commodity ("A New Vision for Children in the Worshipping Community" in *A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship*, p. 9).

Witvliet also provides a checklist for church staff or a worship team to use in an evaluative discussion:

- We communicate in writing to all parents about the importance of children in public worship.
- We make sure to announce or print the page number of every song or prayer or Scripture reading, so that children can find their places in the worship book, hymnal, or Bible.
- Our pastor includes at least one example, illustration, or story in each sermon that relates to children's experiences.
- Our church education program teaches children about the basic actions of worship and worship-related words that are difficult to understand (such as "alleluia," "amen," or "sacrament").
- Our church education program teaches children to memorize the basic texts our congregation speaks in worship, such as the Lord's Prayer or other regular responses (such as the Doxology).
- Our church uses symbolic colors for the seasons of the church year, and we teach our children why the colors change throughout the year.
- There are children regularly involved in the worship leadership team of our congregation.
- In the intercessory prayer, at least one concern is mentioned every week that relates specifically to children's experiences (perhaps the beginning of the school year, for example).
- In every service, there is at least one song that all the children will know.
- Our pastor has met with every church education class to answer the questions the children have about worship.
- Our greeters at church make sure to welcome all of the children as they come to worship.
- When people in our congregation greet each other during worship (sometimes called the passing of the peace, the welcome, or the mutual greetings), all of the children participate.
- Our children have taken a tour of the worship space. They have all been able to touch the large communion cup or the water in the baptismal font or pool. They all have stood at the pulpit or ambo or lectern where the preacher, minister, or clergy stand during the service.
- Our church uses banners which change for the seasons of the church year. We teach the children what the symbols on each one mean.
- Children in our congregation regularly participate in the offering. Their parents encourage them to give part of their allowance to the ministries of the church or provide money for them to contribute

during the offering.

- During congregational singing, children in our congregation are active participants, following the music in a hymnal or printed order of service (or however the music is available) ("Checklists for Congregations Concerned about Children in Worship, *A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship*, pp. 70-71).

We suggest that you set this list before the members of your church staff or worship planning team in preparation for the next meeting. Ask them to reflect on each of these while they worship each week. Then in your group evaluative discussion, make three separate categories on a marker board or overhead projector, and reach a group consensus on how your church is doing in each of the items on the checklist:

- Matters we are fulfilling very well
- Matters on which we've made a beginning but need improvement
- Matters we've not considered and ought to
- Other helpful matters not mentioned here that we are doing

### **How Do We Prepare Our Children to Come into Worship?**

Many parents seem to fear that it will not work to keep their children in public worship with them. They believe the children will not understand anything, or they won't be able to sit that long, or others around them will be annoyed by their wiggling and noise. All such concerns come from the feeling that public worship is really an adult event. This doesn't have to be the case, and there are many things that parents can do to make their worship experience as a family "child-friendly."

Carolyn Brown is a Christian Education specialist and writer who has written several books on this subject. At the recent Conference on Liturgy and Music in Denver, she presented her "Guidelines for Taking Children to Worship" that parents will find very helpful.

1. Sunday morning starts on Saturday night. Lay out the clothes, ready the offering envelopes, and gather together everything you'll need.
2. Make Sunday morning different! Set the alarm early enough to allow a relaxed pace. Have a simple, special Sunday breakfast.
3. As a rule, sit as a family and do not separate to sit with friends. (Friends tend to distract.)
4. Bring no distracting books, toys, or games to the sanctuary.
5. Plan ahead to avoid bathroom parades.
6. Worship WITH rather than BESIDE children.
  - Stand children on the pew so that their ears, eyes, and mouths are near those of other worshipers as they sing, pray, and read together.
  - Hum or la-la along with those who cannot yet read the words.
  - Sing repeated phrases and choruses within the hymns.
  - Help young readers use hymnals and Bibles. Follow printed lines with a bookmark or the edge of the bulletin. Use the large-print hymnal. (Few children read music.)
  - Whisper instructions. "Now is the time we tell God about stuff we are sorry about." "Listen to this story. It is a good one!"
  - Whisper questions. "How do you think Jesus felt when that happened?" "What does this say about how you felt yesterday?"
  - Whisper comments about what it means to you. After the doxology say, "My best blessing this week was our picnic!"
7. Avoid criticism and complaints fueled by fatigue and hunger in the car on the way home. Instead, hear what people did, enjoyed, and wondered about.
8. Enjoy holy hugs. There is much to be treasured and little to be embarrassed about when a twelve-year-old lays her head on her father's shoulder in church.
9. Be firm and consistent. Apply the same discipline for worship failures that is applied in any other important matter.

You will find these materials, and many other valuable insights and suggestions, in Carolyn Brown's book, *You Can Preach to the Kids, Too!* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997). The above guidelines are taken from page 109.

Next week we'll continue to explore this subject of child-friendly worship. Subjects such as the children's message, children

and song, children and prayer, and designing a series of child-friendly services still need to be addressed.

**Published:** August 29, 2004

**Resource Type:** [Article](#)

**Category:** [Intergenerational Worship](#)

**Task:** [Research a topic](#)

**Tags:** [Intergenerational Worship](#), [Children](#), [Children's Message](#)

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# Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

## Worship That Is Friendly to Children - Part 2

Perhaps the most common way of trying to include children in worship is by providing a "children's message" during the service. Though this practice is very common, and potentially very valuable, there are also significant difficulties and risks involved.

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### The Children's Message

Perhaps the most common way of trying to include children in worship is by providing a "children's message" during the service. Though this practice is very common, and potentially very valuable, there are also significant difficulties and risks involved.

The children's message can be a valuable time for the children to be "up close" to the pastor if they come forward to meet him or her, and it gives the pastor the opportunity to relate to the children in a much more personal way. This event often makes children feel that they are important by focusing the attention on them. If handled correctly, this can be an excellent time for teaching the children about matters relating to worship, the sanctuary, and the liturgy.

However, various problems can creep into this part of the worship service. Often the one presenting the children's message is speaking to adults more than the children, though not admitting it. Or it can become a time for children to "act out" in a distracting way, though it may evoke laughter from the congregation. If someone other than the pastor presents the message to the children it may raise in children's mind the fear that they don't count enough to warrant the pastor's attention. And if moralisms or object lessons are the focus of this message, they can easily go beyond a young child's ability to grasp or understand.

Whatever your practice, we offer the following guidelines so that if you include children's messages, you will be able to do them well:

1. The pastor should present the children's message most of the time so children don't get the message that you "turn them over" to someone else.
2. Don't try to engage in funny and unpredictable dialogue; it can be distracting in public worship.
3. If you bring the children forward, find a position where you face them and can speak to them, rather than sitting on the steps with them and facing the same direction they do.
4. Get down on the children's level (physically) and speak at their eye-level. Having a small stool to sit on can be very helpful.
5. Vary the placement of the children's message in the worship service so that its location in the liturgy is appropriate to the subject of the message.
6. Speak about the liturgy on a regular basis, using the children's message as an opportunity to teach kids why we are doing this or that in worship. (You will find the appendix of Marva Dawn's book *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* [Eerdmans, 1995, pp. 305-307] to be very helpful in this regard.)
7. Use the children's message to speak to them about the different seasons of the church year, noting the change of the season, the purpose of the season, the color, symbols, etc.
8. Use stories of many different kinds to engage the children into thinking about their world and God. (Refer to John Timmer's essay "Once upon a Time," posted on this website for January 18, 2004.)
9. Teach the children liturgical responses that help involve them in worship (for example, "The Lord be with you" . . . "And also with you").
10. Include a prayer in your message with them. Be sure to pray about matters of interest to them. We suggest repetitive prayers (we called them "Simon Sez Prayers") in which the leader prays a phrase, and the children repeat it. This includes the kids in praying and models praying for them.
11. The children's message should be consistent with the remainder of the liturgy and reinforce its theme and purpose.

## Children and Song

It has always been intriguing for us to see children grow into worship. Observing children—from the toddler to the preschooler to the elementary school to the middle school child—can provide insights into that growth. A toddler who works at getting a hymnal out of a pew rack, opens it, and holds it upside down shows that she knows this book is important in worship. A preschooler who searches for song numbers with a parent or older sibling demonstrates the same. Parents who help guide their children through songs and Scripture continue the process of drawing children into the worship life of their church.

Music of the church should be accessible to all ages. Children are eager to learn and open to a wide variety of hymnody. We sell our youth short when we type-cast them into a certain mold or form of musical expression. It has been interesting to us that when children have an opportunity to select songs for worship they are as often interested in singing a metrical hymn as a praise chorus. We need to introduce them to the songs of faith that have nurtured their parents and grandparents. We also need to introduce them to contemporary forms of expression that nurture their faith and bring glory to God. We encourage you to balance your musical diet between songs that teach and nurture faith and those shorter, more easily-learned repetitive choruses. We do not divide these songs up into categories of head or heart, but rather believe that the best of both metrical hymnody and cyclical choruses reflect both the head and the heart.

In some ways children learn congregational song somewhat by osmosis; their inquisitive natures help them observe and learn what the broader congregation and their parents are modeling for them. We believe churches can also be more directive in instructing children in the song of the church. Developing a process of determining the vital songs of faith that should stay with a child throughout his life and then devising a means of teaching those songs as part of the educational curriculum of the church could be a valuable tool for a congregation. Just as parents purchase clothes or shoes that children will grow into, so too a church education program can invest in songs that children will grow into. In addition, educational settings provide times for children to sing songs that are fitting just for them.

Children should know that their participation in worship singing is desired and appreciated. Each service should have at least one congregational song that the children know. Our church had two hymnals in the pew rack—a children's hymnal and the denominational hymnal. We used both in every service and never legislated how many songs from each hymnal would be used. We let the theme and flow of the service determine the song selection. In addition, songs or responses that are repeated from week to week encourage the participation of children who cannot read, and songs that the congregation is learning in worship can be reinforced in the Sunday school or worship center time. Youth choirs are also a wonderful way to teach the congregation sung prayers and Scripture responses, new songs of faith and anthems written to express the faith of a child in a child's language. In a time and culture where arts programs are being cut or limited in day schools, the church needs to step up to the task of teaching musical language to its youth so that the strong song of the church may continue in future generations.

Sometimes it is very easy to think of children only as a group. But children are individually gifted people of God. Every church has a valuable—and in many cases untapped—pool of talent in their children. To draw out and encourage the development of musical gifts is a rewarding privilege. Children can be invited to play their instruments and use their voices in worship. Even younger children whose repertoire is limited to very short songs can be included when combined with other children who have equally short pieces! They will need some encouragement and some coaching along the way, but we have found openness on their part and a rich blessing for the congregation when they are participants in leadership too.

So, how are songs selected? We encourage you to invest in a variety of children's hymnals to help inform your choices. We also encourage developing a list of songs all children should learn as part of their faith development. That may certainly vary from one congregation to another, but it should also represent the unity of the church from one location to another, one time to another, and one culture to another. Here are a few resources that we suggest you look at:

Children's Hymnals:

*All God's People Sing*, Concordia Publishing House

*Rise Up and Sing: Young People's Music Resource*, OCP Publications

*Songs for LiFE*, Faith Alive Christian Resources

*To God with Love*, Selah Publishing Co.

*We Sing of God*, The Church Hymnal Corporation

Periodical Resource:

*The Chorister*, a journal of The Choristers Guild

## Children and Prayer

Prayer is at the heart of Christian worship. Learning how to pray is at the heart of a child's spiritual formation. Therefore, involving children in worship prayers is vitally important. Those who write and lead prayers in public worship should regularly include concerns of the children, and the language used in prayers must be accessible to children. But we also suggest that children themselves write and lead prayer for worship. What can be more meaningful for an intergenerational congregation of worshipers than to sense the freshness in praying words that a child has written, and to be led in prayer by a child!

A variety of resources are available to worship planners who are searching for prayers and readings that are accessible to children. *The Worship Sourcebook*, recently published by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Faith Alive Christian Resources and Baker Book House (available from your bookstore or Faith Alive Resources, 1-800-333-8300), contains many resources and prayers that are child-friendly. More such resources can be found in *A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship* (pp. 84-89).

We also encourage you to include your children in writing prayers for public worship. Teachers in your Christian education ministry will be able to identify children who have gifts that can be used for this purpose. Some will be gifted to write the prayers, some to lead in prayer, and some to do both. Encourage the teachers to work with the children on a continuing basis. Make it an exercise in the worship center or church school class. Worship will take on a whole new relevance for children when their prayers are included.

For example, in one of the worship services at the Conference on Liturgy and Music in Denver this summer, Lynnae Keeley, a middle school student, participated with other adults in leading the liturgy. For the service of confession she wrote the prayer of confession that contained the freshness of a child's expression, and it became all the more meaningful when she led in the prayer. A child's voice expressing these words infuses a new spirit in worship. Here is Lynnae's prayer:

Dear God,  
You are a great and awesome God.  
Today we come to you in a prayer of confession.  
We are sorry for the many things that we have done that are wrong in your eyes.  
We are also sorry for all the things we should have done but we didn't do.  
We are asking now for forgiveness for these things,  
and for other things that we have done wrong and don't even know about.  
Please forgive us.  
In your name alone we pray, Amen.

This may have been a special time in worship for Lynnae, but it was for everyone else too. Identify some of your gifted children and begin to include them in writing and leading some prayers.

### **A Series of Services**

Still another possibility to consider is planning a series of worship services with an intentional focus on children. How exciting to plan liturgies, prayers, and sermons that will be aimed at the concerns of children instead of adults!

We did this in the pastorate we served and found it be highly appreciated by adults and children, not as something novel and new, but as an excellent way to experience intergenerational worship. A series of four Sunday evening services was included under the theme of "Kids of the Covenant." The brainstorming for this possibility began in the worship committee, and soon drew in other key people from our children's ministry. Many helpful ideas were suggested, and we agreed that the following guidelines would be followed:

1. The pastor would set the basic direction for each service by his selection of the passage of Scripture and theme of the sermon.
2. The primary focus of the entire service should be on children, with a secondary focus on adults (just the opposite of our usual worship).
3. The children should serve as worship leaders wherever possible and appropriate. We wanted the services to be worship *by* children as well as *for* children.
4. These services, though different, should include certain standard and recognizable features so that there would continuity with the normal worship life of the congregation. We didn't want a once-a-year-extravaganza that could prove how out-of-the-ordinary we could be.
5. The messages should be written and addressed to the life issues of elementary and middle school children. We decided that, because children have shorter attention spans than adults do, several short messages would be more appropriate than one larger one.

6. Congregational songs should be intergenerational, those that are known and recognized by children but are able to draw all ages together in unity. We wanted these services to pay credence to the unity of the body while highlighting children.

In our planning process we focused on several additional matters: a special banner that pointed to the role of children in the church, a liturgy that included personal expressions of faith by children and families, children in liturgical and musical leadership, and sermon outlines that were appropriate to children.

We found this to be a fascinating and rich experience. The four services, with service notes, were printed in [Reformed Worship 36](#).

## Helps and Resources

It will be very helpful for all worship planners to have a variety of resources in either their personal library or the church library. Here are a few of the resources that we highly recommend on the matter of children and worship.

Brown, Carolyn, *You Can Preach to the Kids, Too! Designing Sermons for Adults and Children*, Abingdon Press, 1997.

Dawn, Marva J., *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children*, Eerdmans, 1997.

Ng, David, and Virginia Thomas, *Children in the Worshiping Community*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1981.

[Reformed Worship 12](#) (June 1989), CRC Publications/Faith Alive.

[Reformed Worship 36](#) (June 1995), CRC Publications/Faith Alive.

Sandell, Elizabeth J., *Including Children in Worship: A Planning Guide for Congregations*, Augsburg Press, 1991.

Witvliet, John D., ed., *A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship*, The Choristers Guild and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 1999.

In our attempt to make the worship service and worship space friendly to the children, we also suggest that you consider using several other types of aids. A children's bulletin that includes activities and incorporates elements of the liturgy and the theme of the sermon will be an excellent tool. Sermon outlines that are written with children in mind can be included. Sanctuary visuals are particularly meaningful for children. A variety of postings appearing in the sanctuary will speak to their minds and hearts. Colorful banners and other sanctuary colors and symbols that reflect the season will also be helpful.

**Published:** September 04, 2004

**Resource Type:** [Article](#)

**Category:** [Intergenerational Worship](#)

**Task:** [Teach about a topic](#)

**Tags:** [Children](#), [Children's Message](#)

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