

Worshipping Together with Children

Beginning with ourselves.

1. What experiences have you had of intergenerational worship?
2. How did the service cater for the needs of the different generations?
3. What positive benefits emerged for the children, young people and adults who participated?
4. Were negative consequences, if any eventuated?

Some common objections to worshipping together with children.

- Children distract the adults
- Children don't understand
- Children don't like it
- Children need to be in their own programme.
- Adults can't worship properly
- Parents need time out
- Pastors lose freedom to speak
- Worship leaders are constrained
- Children take up seats needed for adults

Some Theological Reasons for Worshipping Together with Children

1. We need to worship together with children to faithfully follow the teaching and example of Jesus.
(*Matthew 18:1ff, 19:13-14, 21:14-17, Mark 10:13-16*)
2. We need to worship together with children in order to express the true nature of the church.
(*Acts 21:5, Ephesians 5:22-6:9, Colossian 3:18-4:1, Galatians 1:11-14, 1 Corinthians 11:17-22*)
3. We need to worship together with children to experience the full meaning and blessing of the Lord's Supper.
(*1 Corinthians 11:17-22*)
4. We need to worship together with children because this is an essential context for adults and children to learn and grow in.
(*Deuteronomy 12:1-19, 19:10-2, 29:10-12, 31:12-13, Joshua 8:34, 2 Chronicles 20:4,13, Nehemiah 12:43, Psalm 148:12-14, Luke 2:41, 4.14; Mark 10:13-16, Matthew 4:21, 21:14-17, Ephesians 6:1-3*)
5. We need to worship together with children so that we can strengthen the bonds between generations that make possible the mutual enrichment of faith and life.
(*Exodus 10:7-11*)

Three Core Principles to Build On

1. Children and adults belong together at the feet of Jesus in worship.
2. Children and adults need to gather together for worship on a regular basis.
3. Children and adults need to work together to order their worship in ways that reflect and enhance their mutual belonging and togetherness in Christ.

Some Common Approaches to Intergenerational Worship with some reflections on their strengths and weaknesses.

Special Children's or Family Services. (Specialist) Some churches like to have regular or occasional special services for children and their families. These services often "revolve around the children". They are usually planned with a view of maximising the participation and attention of the children and sometimes attracting the non-church going parents of Sunday school children. A variety of things are done in an attempt to make these services attractive for the children and parents. They could include the following:

- A gifted children's communicator may be invited to speak.
- The children may present a special drama, tableau, and/or performance.
- Prizes and awards may be given out to children.
- The music that is used may be more "child centred" and include a number of songs for children.
- Fun and games elements may feature highly.
- The children may lead most or all of the service.

Events like these can be valuable occasions and help to connect children into the wider congregation. They give the opportunity for the children to display their talents, celebrate achievements and use their gifts. They often have a high cute and entertaining quota for adults and a corresponding cringe factor for teens! Churches need freedom to include them in their schedule of worship services as they see fit. In my view however it is better not to see these as the primary or typical model for worshipping together with children. It is better to see services like these as belonging to the top of the food pyramid rather than the bottom! If this is the only or primary model churches have for "worshipping together with children" it will leave them with a distorted view of child friendly worship. Adults will be left thinking 'we have to sit back and watch the children perform', teachers will be thinking 'we have to work our butts off every time we have children involved', worship leaders will be left thinking, "the adults are being left out" and pastors will be thinking "I don't have the ability to preach regularly to kids, we need a specialist to do it". Child friendly worship includes and embraces children but it does not allow them to dominate the Service or become the major attraction. As long as children's services are infrequent special or extra events children are likely to be viewed as guests in the adult world and remain on the margins of congregational life.

The Children's Talk or Song Approach. (Tokenist) The need to "have something for the children" is acknowledged and their presence is planned for. The regular Sunday services include a slot for the children where a story is told and/or a children's song is sung.

When this is done well and is surrounded by other "child friendly components" it can be quite effective. When little or nothing else is often done to embrace and include the children it becomes shallow and tokenist. In addition when the people who give the

children's talk have little understanding of children's developmental needs the talk and teaching go straight over the top of the children's heads!

Fun & Games/Bag of Laughs routine. (Humorist) Some people think that in order to hold children's attention during worship you need a string of fun activities and games and lots of jokes and humour. They believe that in order to be relevant to the children they need to have a high energy, high entertainment value "programme".

I believe that churches that shape their worship with children around this belief are mistaken. While there is a place for humour, fun and laughter in the context of worship it should not be the dominating feature. Our worship leaders and pastors need to be creative and demonstrate a sense of humour; they don't need to be comedians or circus entertainers. The purpose of worship is not entertainment, amusement or personal gratification. The purpose of worship is to meet with and honour God. If we overuse fun and humour we will trivialise God and ultimately feed the children's boredom. The entertainment buzz will soon wear thin or wear off and so will interest in church and God.

AO Rated Worship. (Elitist) Elitism = "dominance by a select group" The children are "allowed" (by condescending adults) to come into the service for a period of time. The adults don't really believe that they fit there or know what to do with them. Little or nothing is subsequently done to help children participate. In some churches the worship leaders and pastors tolerate the children without embracing them. In some churches pastors and worship leaders having the children in the services. In some churches the adults can't seem to wait for children to go out so they can get on with "real worship" and preaching. The children are considered to be an intrusion, a distraction and a hindrance in an adult world.

Entirely separate programme for children. (Separatist) The children are sent off to learn and worship in their own programmes for the duration of the whole Sunday Service because the leaders and/or church believe this is the best way to do church. The children may come in for Easter, Christmas and a few other special occasions but otherwise never gather with the other generations in the church for worship. Teachers and volunteers are able to provide age focused learning experiences for children, parents and adults are free from potential child distractions and the children often enjoy the programmes. On the other hand with children and adults worshipping and learning in entirely different world's key opportunities for relational bonding, tacit learning, spiritual modelling, socio/cultural conditioning, community awareness and transfer of Gods gifts across the generations are lost.

Embrace the children as fellow worshippers on a regular basis (Inclusivist) The worship could be called "child friendly". The children are embraced by the adults and young people as fellow worshippers (not shallow worshippers). Worship is structured on a regular basis not to focus on them but to include them and facilitate their participation alongside the other generations. A variety of methods and approaches are used to facilitate this togetherness in worship.

What Child Friendly Worship does NOT mean

- Having "something in the service for the kids"
- Finding ways of keeping them occupied while adults get on with worship as usual
- Dumbing down the worship experience for adults

- Having a pile of “childish” games, songs and activities
- Gearing everything for or around the children
- Providing a high powered entertainment package
- Diminishing the value of the Preaching &/or teaching

**Child Friendly Worship begins with
*a new way of seeing children***

- Children are designed for inclusion in our worship not exclusion.
- Children are designed to be an asset to our worship not a liability
- Children are designed to be contributors to worship not consumers
- Children are to be participants in worship not passengers
- Children are a critical presence not an optional presence.
- Children are fellow worshippers not shallow worshippers

Child Friendly Worship

1. Embraces children as equal members of the church community
2. Enfolds them regularly into the services of worship.
3. Enables them to participate meaningfully with the other generations.
4. Empowers them through involvement to grow as disciples of Christ.

Practical Ways of Embracing Children in Worship.

Let them help with the service.

- Children can work alongside adults to help set up and clean up the worship space. Doing so helps them take ownership of the worship centre.
- Children, who are interested in artwork, can be asked to make a banner or display piece for the sanctuary. It would be especially good to ask their parents to make this a family project with each member of the family participating.
- Children can welcome people to the service and hand out newsletters.
- Children can help usher and show people to their seats.
- Children can be asked to offer prayers during the service. These can be prayers of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, confession and/or intercession. They may need some help from their parents to write out their prayers.
- Children with sufficient ability can read the Scriptures during the service. Again parents and care givers could coach them to read with clear diction and expression first.
- A group of children could prepare dramatic readings of Bible passages on which the sermon is based. Egs. Act out a passage in pantomime while it is being read aloud by someone else. Memorize spoken parts in the text and

act them out as the passage is read. Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

- Children with acting ability can also contribute other skits and dramas that harmonise with the theme of the service.
- Children can prepare and present dance and pageantry pieces.
- Children who play a musical instrument well, can be asked to do so in the worship service, either individually or as part of a group that practices and contributes regularly.
- Children who sing well can join the singers in the worship team.
- Children can sing solos, duets and other "group" items.
- A children's group or choir could be formed to help lead the congregation in worship or combine with adults to do the same.
- Children can help take up the offering.
- Children can help pass out the bread and wine and where necessary gather up the cups.
- Children can help to operate computers and/or other technical equipment during the service. Many 11 & 12 year olds are more competent and confident with technology than adults.
- Children can be invited to tell stories of their faith experiences either on their own or in the context of an interview.
- Children can help with other ritual or liturgical actions such as lighting candles, bringing in a bible, uncovering a communion table etc

Pastors, leaders and other adults can facilitate their involvement and participation

- Parents and caregivers can be given a list of suggested ways to help their children and others prepare for and participate in worship. (See "Parenting in the Pews")
- Training events and discussion forums can be held focusing on equipping parents and care givers for worshipping with their children.
- Families with children, especially those with small children can be encouraged to sit as close to the front as possible, so the children can more easily see all that is going on and feel a part of the service. Alternatively some "high rise" seats could be provided at the back so that children can see over the tops of adult heads.
- Pastors and worship leaders can learn to be accepting and tolerant of children's developmental needs allowing a certain amount of movement and noise from the little people.
- Pastors and worship leaders can greet the children specifically along with the adults.
- Pastors and worship leaders can include songs that the children know, understand and enjoy.
- Pastors and worship leaders can invite children to move with the music.
- Pastors and worship leaders can include the needs and concerns of children in their intercessory prayers.
- Pastors and worship leaders can include a special "short talk" for children.
- Children can participate with adults in discussion about parts of the sermon or service.
- Write prayers up on the Power Point or Overhead Projector.
- Use memorised prayers. Eg. The Lord's Prayer.

- Use responsive prayers where the leader and congregation speak responsively.
- Use invitation prayers where the leader mentions a subject and allows time for people to offer their prayers either silently or aloud.
- Include a confession of faith such as the “apostle’s creed”.
- Provide a children’s section in your newsletter or a separate children’s newsletter. The children’s newsletter can contain activities for children that are related to the service for the day. For example, it can have a section for younger children who can’t write to just draw a picture of something the speaker says, a section for older children to answer questions about what the speaker is saying and that explains an aspect of the worship service (such as why we have an offering and telling why their offering is also valuable), and another section for older children for note-taking.
- Activity packs can be made available to children that have worksheets pens and simple crafts that tie in with the service theme and message.
- During the sermon.
 - Use words children can understand. When a complex word or term has to be used, define and explain it, and give an illustration.
 - Use examples, stories and illustrations that include children or that children can relate to.
 - Speak directly to the children when making an application that is appropriate to them.
 - Include pictures of children and things of interest to children in your power point presentations.
 - Ask a child to help you with a prop.
- Encourage children to give during the offering from their income and earnings.
- Invite the whole congregation to respond with simple phrases at specific points during the service, for example:
 - Saying “Amen” following the words, “through Jesus Christ, our Lord” at the end of prayers.
 - Saying “Thanks be to God” after the Bible reading when the person who was reading concludes the Bible reading by saying, “This is the Word of the Lord.”
- Allow children to participate in the Lords Supper.

Churches wishing to embrace children in their worship do not have to adopt all these things at once, or even use every one of them. There is no point in overloading yourself with work or the congregation with change! It’s best to take as many ideas as you can at one time and integrate others as you move towards embracing the children more fully.

Scheduling & Structuring Your Services.

I do not believe that churches need to adopt an identical; one size fits all approach to worshipping together with children. In the same way that a variety of practical ingredients can be used to help make worship child friendly, a variety of approaches can also be made to scheduling and structuring services where children worship together with the wider congregation. These services do need to be regular and meaningful however so that the generations connect in and through their worship. If

the Services are infrequent, irregular and poorly done they will have a negative effect on the whole church.

Churches can schedule and organise regular Child Friendly Worship Services in a variety of ways. Here are some suggested approaches.

1. Structure your regular Sunday Services to include children for a significant part of the service and regularly include them in communion. (If you only have communion once a month consider including them for the whole service on those Sundays.)
2. Structure regular Sunday services during term time to include children. During the holidays allow the children go to age based activities during the service.
3. Structure regular Sunday Services during school holidays to include children for the whole service. During the term time allow the children go to age based activities during the service.
4. I would also recommend always structuring your services to include children on the Major Christian Feast Days: Christmas, Easter Friday and Sunday, and Pentecost.

Wrapping Up.

You'll recollect that in Mark chapter 10 Jesus told his well meaning but misguided disciples to, "Let the children come to me and do not forbid them, for the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. He drew the children into the circle of seekers and worshippers and blessed them. He taught his disciples to open up their hearts and their arms to children. I believe God wants us to do the same with the children in our churches and communities: to draw them into the circle of seekers and worshippers and allow them to be blessed by the Christ. Let me finish with a story.

"The first word I ever learned to read was *Selah* because of reading psalms during worship in the church. My mother always traced the text with her finger so I could follow it and begin to associate words with letters on the page. Soon I noticed that when the congregation said a certain word that I didn't understand, it was printed off to the side. I began to watch for those words in the margin and could shout "*Selah*" with the community whenever it appeared... as a wee one I participated in psalm praise with my joyful *Selaha*s and felt a part of the community. By the time I was five, weekly worship had taught me to sing entire liturgies. (page 83, Marva Dawn, *Is it a Lost Cause: Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children*. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1997

We include children in our worship because scripture commends it, church history confirms its continuing relevance, educational and social science research affirms its importance, and positive personal experience attests to its value. Let's open our hearts and arms and embrace the children that God has dared to entrust us with.