
5 Leading Children into Worship Through the Home

Children learn to worship in the home.

The church is a partner with the home in this process.

As children worship at home they will also take their place in the worshipping household of God.

It's as simple as 1-2-3, *except* . . .

. . . *Except* not all children learn to worship God at home. True, they learn to worship what the adults they love and trust value, but this is not always God even when the parents are related to the church.

. . . *Except* the noun *home* needs definition. What do we mean by *home*? Is it a place where they live? Some children spend more hours in a day care center than in their own homes or apartments. Some children, due to custody arrangements in divorce, spend parts of time in two homes. Some children are really at "home" before a television set.

Home, of course, means persons, including the adults who love and care for the child physically and emotionally. But home can be one parent, two parents, two sets of parents, a relative, or a parent substitute. A nursery teacher or a babysitter may have as much influence as a parent.

With whom is the church a partner? The legal guardians or the interested grandmother who brings the child to church with her? The parents who are with the child two days a week, one of these days being Sunday, or the neighbor who cares for the child from daylight to dark five days a week? The parental relationship in actuality may be divided among several adults who are related to one another only through the child.

. . . *Except* there can be no partnership with only one partner. We are fully aware that the church often fails in its responsibility to support the home in the task of leading children into worship. But many homes are indifferent or unwilling partners. Any church school roll represents a wide spectrum of commitment, from parents who are vitally related to Christ and his church and covet this relationship for their children to parents whose primary interest is in having reasonably safe, free babysitting while they read the Sunday newspaper in peace.

. . . *Except* not all home worship is related to congregational worship in the understanding and practice of parents. Many Christian adults consider their worship a private affair. A deep streak of individualism separates their prayers to God from the prayers of the community of God. They want their children to seek God in prayer, to hear God speak, to give themselves to God, but for them this has no connection with corporate worship.

Arlo Duba, Director of the Chapel at Princeton Seminary, describes the phenomenon of "Seminarians Who Have Never Been to Church."¹³ The church boom of twenty-five years ago required duplicate services of worship. Church school and worship occurred simultaneously. Though the need has ended the pattern has continued. Education is chosen for the young and worship for the more mature.

Says Duba, "There are many young people who get to or perhaps through high school without ever having had an opportunity to worship, to become acquainted with hymns, to hear the Bible preached, to sense their oneness with an intergenerational body of believers. Their church experience is homogeneous, graded first as pre-school, then primary, then junior."¹⁴

The link between home worship and the gathered church is not always understood. For many church members the individual and the home are entirely separate from the body of Christ in acts of devotion and praise. These exceptions must be kept before us as we plan ways to work with the home in leading children into worship.

Principles for the Home-Church Partnership in Worship

We believe we are called to worship as families and as the church family. We want our children to worship with us. We want to work through the primary channel God has provided for worship education: the home. How shall we do this? What principles support sound practices? What strategies shall we employ to invite, support, and educate the home?

Our first principle is this: Children learn in the home. This has been evident since the first mention in the Bible of religious education in Hebrew homes. Walking, talking, and working in the rhythm of the day's activities and in the silent symbols around them, children will grow in worship. Most children will hear God's call to worship at an early age through the adults they love and trust. When parents recognize and respond to God, young children imitate, then join in the acts and attitudes we call worship.

It happens in the quietest and subtlest of ways. Day by day the ones who are close to the child look beyond themselves to One who is close to them. A hymn sung while dishes are washed, a record played, a book read, a creche lovingly unpacked at Christmas, or a gift offered to someone in need are unspoken testimony to the adults' trust. The unseen One is thanked at meals, consulted in decisions, sought in crisis, and included in joy.

Gradually a pattern takes shape: there are special times to be with God at home; a special time and place to be with others who trust God too; special seasons to rejoice in what the One who is always present has done. Gradually, too, a Person emerges, opening his arms to children, feeding the hungry, enjoying birds and flowers, healing the sick, and stilling the storm.

With little formal or planned instruction the young child is drawn into worship just as he or she is drawn into speech. Before they can read or write, children can have entered the profoundest experiences of worship—joy, confession, forgiveness, acceptance, and dedication.

The pattern of living, loving, and leading must always be before the church. When a child's home does not offer this, any substitute we try to offer must be built on this principle of a child related to a worshiping adult.

A second principle is this: We must adapt our ministry of support to the variety of homes we serve. We cannot and should not usurp the role of the home in a child's life, even when we invite the child to an experience the home rejects. It is a temptation to criticize adults who show no concern for worship or to judge those whose lifestyles are built on values we question. Our task is not to remake homes to fit one pattern, particularly a pattern that fits our opinions and plans. We must look for evidences of God's work in every home and build on and cultivate the strength there.

Our plans must be as diverse as our children's homes.

An affluent family is on vacation three months each year on a secluded island resort; a church school teacher mails them a church bulletin each week with a few comments penciled on the margin.

A mother's work schedule requires one Sunday a month on the job; another family picks up her children on those Sundays and returns them home after lunch eager to tell their mother what happened at church.

A mother and father feel uncomfortable about their children's behavior in church; an intergenerational retreat with worship in an informal setting and opportunities to know older members lessens their concern.

A new family in town is unhappy in a new and different church setting; the pastor visits, goes over the order of worship, and explains "why we do things this way and how we adapt this basic plan to different situations."

A father has grown up in a different tradition of worship; a class on worship allows him to explore and evaluate his church's own tradition.

A serious illness occurs; the family receives a card of love and concern and a statement, "We prayed for you in the Prayers of the People on Sunday."

The paths into worshiping in homes are as numerous and varied as the homes. Some are carefully planned educational ventures and some are informal encounters. Some are thoughtful friendship. Some are ministry in crisis. The whole church is involved, from pastor to every member who worships.

As we plan specific approaches and programs to educate and support families in worship we will keep in mind the home, the center where God first calls children to worship, and the varied homes God calls to worship in our particular congregation.

Strategies for Working with the Home

Our first strategy can be to nurture the adults who nurture the children. Worshiping adults lead children into worship. This suggests vital congregational worship, inviting parents into God's presence. Parents need opportunities to study about prayer, theology, Bible, and worship. They need opportunities to serve as liturgists and choir members. This may mean a nursery during rehearsals and planning sessions or a friend to sit with their children on these occasions. There should be a welcome for children of all ages and care for these children when it is appropriate.

The emphasis here is not on parents as teachers of children; it is on parents as children of God with needs to praise, confess, hear, and dedicate themselves in a fellowship of believers. Pastoral and educational leadership will help them apply the liturgy to their daily lives.

Our second strategy can be guidance in home worship. Expertise in worship education does not automatically follow the birth of a child. Parents who worship regularly may have difficulty expressing what they know about worship. They may expect too much of children, or too little. They may secretly believe the hasty "thank you" to beat the first bite of a meal is valued less by God than the formal prayer of the sanctuary. A three-minute attention span may seem too brief to make a Bible story worthwhile.

The church can help parents develop realistic expectations and resources to meet different ages and abilities. A church library can offer books, records, tapes, games, and pictures. We can help families in establishing rituals and celebrating holidays so these times become both a recognition of and response to what God is doing.

We may need to eliminate some meetings or ask parents to do less so they will have time to cultivate the life of worship at home. There is merit in the Mormon idea of one family night a week with no television, outside recreation, or meetings, including church meetings.

In one church an intergenerational study of prayer provided a valuable resource for home worship. All ages listed important events in their lives. The events included a new baby, the first day of school, learning to ride a bicycle, a new house, entering high school, the beginning of a vacation, a new job, a serious illness, the death of a pet or a loved one, and getting married. The group divided the list of events and in teams of two or three persons they wrote prayers for each event. Another evening they listed all the persons who had helped them or touched their lives that day: teachers, doctors, bus drivers, truck drivers, telephone repair crew, relatives, and others. Again prayers were written, expressing thanks and petition.

Out of this study a book of prayers for all ages was printed. It was drawn from the community life and was relevant to the situations all homes faced each day.

"Family worship would never work at my house," said the father of three boys. "We don't sit still long enough." A few weeks after this remark was made in a class on worship, the family was invited to a fellow class member's home. As the two families came to the table the host said, "We usually join hands and tell the thing we've liked best about the day." It was an easy and comfortable sharing of good test grades, a long distance call, a pretty sunset, and other events and accomplishments. From four through forty, each person contributed. The host concluded with the words, "And God, we thank you for this food, too." It was genuine worship and a demonstration as

well. Family worship could take place without formality and absolute control by parents.

A third strategy can be a clearly stated policy or intent about children and congregational worship. We are diligent in enrolling our baptized children in nurseries and church school classes. Every child receives a card about the choir program or summer camp or vacation church school. Why are we so indefinite about inviting children to congregational worship?

The church cannot and should not dictate what parents do with their children. But without some statement about how and when children can begin to worship with us, most parents will assume that the deciding factor is when their children will not bother anyone. Or they may conclude that they should wait until children achieve a certain level of understanding, with some vague notion of a readiness test. Some assume we wait until children ask to come. Many parents leave their children in nurseries and kindergarten and even in upper elementary grade child care programs rather than bringing them to corporate worship. When a church has no plans or directions, it would seem pleasant for the child and easy for the adults not to bring the child.

When the church pursues the course of offering worship and church school at the same hour, then we have a very questionable policy. Quoting Arlo Duba again, "In actual practice this promotes an assumption which I hope none of us would endorse. It says that the Christian, young or old, needs only one or the other, worship or Christian education." Our practice produces Christians "who do not see worship as important to the Christian life," and encourages "the mentality that wants to fulfill all religious obligations in one hour."¹⁵

Too frequently bad policy or no policy has been our way. We need, as a church family, to think positively and definitely about when and how children can best enter congregational worship. Are babies welcome in the sanctuary? Is alternate care provided for them? If so, why? And if it is provided must it be used? Can a three-year-old benefit from the processional hymn or a joyful anthem by a junior choir? Can this be noted in ad-

vance in the church newsletter or bulletin? Are parents comfortable taking a child from the service after ten minutes? Can the congregation be helped to understand this as a purposeful activity and not as disinterest or insensitivity to the spirit of worship? Are festive occasions a good introduction for kindergarten children? Can a note be sent, helping parents prepare a child for these occasions, noting certain things to observe and talk about? Do we want elementary children to worship regularly? Can we state this and provide recognition for the occasion?

In small congregations with few children, the minister may simply counsel with the parents, but he or she needs the thoughtful decisions of the session or worship committee behind the counsel. Larger churches with larger numbers of families and children may need to undertake more comprehensive publicity and education.

These policies are not laws arbitrarily dictated. They represent the same concern as shown in good planning for church school or other activities. They help parents know what is possible, what is reasonable, and what is helpful. Such prayerfully developed plans make it clear that we love our children and want them to worship God. This expression of the entire church's hopes and expectations interpreted to parents may be one of our strongest strategies of support.

Finally, and partly as an outgrowth of our third strategy, *we can support families in worship with planned education about worship.* Such education can take place in many settings: church school, church night suppers, church retreats, neighborhood clusters, and intergenerational studies built around the church year.

Here two plans are sketched briefly with a look at some learning activities in each.

A Course for Parents: Worship with Our Children

"Worship with Our Children" was a course designed for parents of rising first graders, although any interested parent

asked, "Which part of the service has the most meaning for you? Why?" The parents examined the various values expressed in these orders, then planned an order of worship based on what had meaning for the group. The outcome underscored the soundness of the church's basic plan for worship.

Session IV. Worship: What Do Children Say?

The walls were decorated with pictures children had drawn of worship services they had attended and statements they had made about worship. These were the background for a presentation on the needs and abilities of children at different stages of development. With this information as background, the class discussed how congregational worship might be perceived by a child and what it could mean to him or her.

Sessions V and VI. Worship: How Can We Prepare?

The last two classes provided practical suggestions for helping our children worship with us. A poster displayed a magazine advertisement for an encyclopedia. The picture showed an expectant mother and father surrounded by a baby bed and the clothes, equipment, and supplies necessary for a new baby. The parents were reading and the caption said, "It's never too early to start preparing your child for school."

The parents made a list of how they had or would prepare their children for the first day of school. It included such things as:

Long-Range Preparation

Good health care, opportunities for development in self-confidence, group relationships.

Reading, picture books, Mother Goose rhymes.

A target date, knowing school is required and when.

One-Year Preparation

Enrollment in a good nursery school.

Sesame Street, educational television.

Positive comments about learning and school.

Handling paper, pencil, scissors.
 Opportunities to make things, develop skills.
 Learning the alphabet, printing one's name, calling attention to letters.

Immediate Preparation

Physical examination.
 Visit school.
 Meet teacher.
 Make sure they know at least one child in their class.
 Positive comments and anticipation. Talking about what will happen.
 Buying school clothes for comfort.
 Buying supplies.
 Lunch money and lunch.
 Good night of sleep, regular bed time.

From this list it was obvious that parents had a commitment to education. They understood its necessity in a child's life and positively built toward its success.

The group was then asked to list what steps we take to prepare our children for congregational worship. We know a vital aspect of the Christian life is corporate worship; we know children must begin to worship with the congregation at some point; the church has set first grade as the target date. How do we prepare our children?

The contrast in the two lists was apparent. The group began to build a list by paralleling some of the preparations we make for school.

The last session concluded with these words: "For the next several years you will be worshiping through your ministry to your own child. As you answer questions, guide young eyes across a page, locate a scripture, or point out a place in the bulletin, do not mistakenly feel you have interrupted your worship, or feel you are interrupting the worship of others. Remember, the One whom we worship said, 'Whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this, welcomes me.'"

A Class for Parents and Children: We Worship God

During September and October first and second graders and their parents studied congregational worship together. In the church school hour grown-ups and children selected learning activities planned to help them explore concepts of worship and learn about worship in their own church.

Learning centers and activities were built around six main ideas: praise—the reason we worship; the church family in which we worship; persons who lead us in worship; our special time and place for worship; acts of worship; and the sacraments. The first session focused on the concept of praise. For the second session all centers were built around the idea of the church as a family of praisers. On the following Sundays, selection of centers could be made in any order.

Session I. Praise God

Praise is the attitude that lies at the heart of worship. God has loved and redeemed us; we respond in love, joy, and gratitude. This was the starting point for our family study of worship. The centers were designed to help students focus on God, our reason for praise, or on ways we can praise.

1. *We See God's Love When . . .* Participants contributed to a large wall mural of evidences of God's love through drawings or selecting from an assortment of pictures including scenes of families, material gifts, nature, Jesus, and the church.

2. *A Song of Praise.* Families made a rebus of the Doxology and covered it with plastic to use at the family table for meal-time blessings.

3. *Words of Praise.* Alleluia, Amen, Rejoice, Love, and other key words were cut from tagboard and mounted. Participants made rubbings of these words (a form of printing familiar to anyone who ever placed a coin under a paper and rubbed over it with a pencil). The words were matched with words on a bulletin board. These words gave clues for finding the word in Bible, hymnbook, tape, or record. A by-product of this

vocabulary-building exercise was the demonstration to parents of young children's ability to recognize words in certain contexts although they were not part of their reading vocabulary. Families could decorate pieces cut from a magnet strip to mount their praise words on the refrigerator at home.

4. *Ways to Praise.* On a bulletin board were placed pictures of sports events, a child trying on a dress her mother had made, a husband giving a gift to his wife, etc. On a tape recording were responses that could be made to these pictures: the cheers of a crowd as a touchdown is made; clapping; a verbal thank-you; a statement, "I love you." Students matched the responses and pictures.

5. *Practicing Praise.* This activity was designed to give meaning to the word *praise* by beginning with experiences familiar to almost any family. The center included a leader, four to six chairs in a circle, a three-minute timer, and score sheets mounted on the wall. The object of the game was to say as many good things about members of the group as possible in the designated time. The wall was decorated with a number of incomplete sentences in bright colors, such as:

What I like most about you is . . .
 I'm happy to be with you because . . .
 I think you're great because . . .
 One thing you've done that I like is . . .
 You made me happy when . . .

The leader and scorekeeper introduced the game by saying: "Praise means saying something good to someone or saying something good about someone. Most of us praise every day. We already know how. But like any good thing we do, praise needs practice." The leader explained the object of the game and kept score. The family with the highest praise score at the end of the hour received blue ribbons with "PRAISE" lettered on them.

When the time was up (usually there were two three-minute periods, with improved performance in the second period) the leader helped the group reflect on what they had

done: "Sometimes it's hard to think of good things about a person even though we know many good things. It's hard to select just one. When you're praising someone you think about them and not yourself. You have to know something about the person to praise them honestly. Praise that you don't really mean doesn't count, but sometimes when you say something you find you mean it. You feel good when you praise someone else."

The leader concluded, "When we worship we praise God. No one keeps score. When we're all together we remember what God has done. We think about how God loves us. We look at the beautiful world God has given us. Then we use words, songs, smiles, gifts, and thoughts to say: 'We love you. We like the things you do. We're happy to be with you. We think you're great because. . .'"

A Sanctuary Tour

Included in the learning activities was a sanctuary tour to help the students recognize the sanctuary as a special place with a special purpose. The students were helped to become acquainted with the furnishings and symbols, to learn what these things told about worship, and to feel at home in the sanctuary.

Among the worship furnishings and objects considered by the group were the choir loft, pulpit, pulpit Bible, paraments, hymnbooks, symbols, pews, communion table, baptismal font, narthex, contents of the pew racks, and organ. Several small suitcases with appropriate travel labels were prepared. A family chose one of these and went to visit the empty sanctuary. The suitcase contained a master card or "ticket" to be marked as each object was found or activity completed, an instruction sheet, and cards with a word or a picture of worship furnishings to be found.

For one activity a small pencil was taped to a card with these instructions: "Find one of these in the sanctuary. How would you use this in worship? Tell your group."

A picture of the baptismal font had these instructions: "Find this in the sanctuary. Stand beside it. Tell everyone when you would use it in a service of worship."

A picture of a pew had these instructions: "What is this called? Choose the place you like to sit. Invite everyone to come sit there with you."

A catalog of church furnishings and supplies was a good source for pictures. With the pictures, young children could receive assignments without having to be able to read. The sanctuary tour as well as the entire study was enriched by large photographs of the sanctuary and of the congregation at worship taken and printed by a young member of the church. Several instruction cards in each suitcase included such photographs.

A special note: Several first and second grade church school pupils had parents who could not or chose not to take part. Other adults were found who took part in the learning activities with these children and then invited the children to worship with them in the hour that followed.

6 Teaching About Worship in Graded Groups

We want our children to worship with us. How can we help them participate with understanding? Structured learning in classes graded by age is an important means of teaching in the church. Can learning in age groups be used to lead children into meaningful worship? The answer to this is a positive "yes" as long as we remember two things:

- The response of Christian worship is always the work of God. We do not create or control this response.
- Instruction is never a substitute for joining with those who worship. Worshiping with others is the indispensable means of nurture.

This means joining with the total church on special occasions for the preschool child and joining regularly in corporate worship for the elementary school child. It is in the midst of the church at worship that a child will observe and be stimulated to ask, to imitate those he or she loves and trusts, and to catch the spirit of the gathered household of God. A classroom cannot create this situation.

What Graded Education Can Do

Graded education can be an efficient and effective way of helping children take part in worship. When we group children by age we can tailor our objectives and methods to their