

Get on Board, Kids! Hospitality to Children in Worship

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them;

For it is to such as these that the dominion of heaven belongs.

And Jesus laid his hands on them and went on his way.

Matthew 19:14-15 (An inclusive Version)

Jesus didn't say, "...as long as they're quiet and well-behaved and respectful..."

Introduction

How are children welcomed in the worship life of your church? **Invite the sharing of examples.**

Is the mood one of tolerance or hospitality? **(Define "tolerance" and "hospitality".)**

Scenarios

1. A new family in your neighborhood arrives at your church just minutes before the start of worship. The family consist of "late-twenty-something" mom and dad, and three children, ages 6, 4, and 10 months.

- ◆ How are they greeted?
- ◆ Are they offered anything?
- ◆ What words are spoken?
- ◆ What in your, gathering space says, "Welcome Kids!"?
- ◆ What says to the parents, "we've come to the right church!"

2. Same scenario as #1 except: the 10-month-old is crying, the 4-year-old looks scared, and the 6-year-old wanders off - exploring the narthex, and heading for the sanctuary.

- ◆ **Now** how are they greeted?
- ◆ What is said?
- ◆ What is not said?

3. A young family comes into church with 2 young children in tow. A very cheerful greeter welcomes them and says, "our nursery is through that door, down the hall, third door on the left." The mother says, "Oh, thank you, but we prefer to have our children stay with us in worship."

- ◆ What is the greeter's response?
- ◆ What is the family offered? (if anything)
- ◆ What is the reaction of others?
- ◆ What is said?
- ◆ What is not said?

4. A young family – long-time members of your church – is seated in worship. During the reading of the morning scripture (or the sermon, or the morning prayer) the "terrible two"-year-old begins to fuss, talk, whine, and fidget. Mom tries to comfort and console the child and when that fails, passes her/him off to dad. Dad, too, is unsuccessful, and the child gets louder. Other congregants turn to see what is going on – some smile, remembering what it was like; others glare at the young family, obviously disturbed or perturbed.

- ◆ What can be done to ease the family's tension or frustration?
- ◆ What resources or materials are available for the young family?
- ◆ What is said?
- ◆ By whom?

5. A young family arrives at church late. Worship has begun. They enter noisily, mom and dad “Shhhh-ing” the children. They come down the aisle looking for a seat (since all the older, hard-of-hearing folks are filling up the back pews) and file into a pew.

- ◆ What is the reaction of the congregation?
- ◆ How is the family welcomed?
- ◆ What is said?
- ◆ What is not said?

6. A young family, new to your neighborhood arrives at your church on Sunday morning. The parents are same-gendered.

- ◆ How is your welcome different?
- ◆ What is the reaction of the greeters?

Discussion

What are some ways we can offer welcome to worshipping families?

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| ◆ Spoken | Children greeters – Youth lay readers, ushers, etc. |
| ◆ Unspoken | Crayons in the pews – signage – kids’ artwork on walls |
| ◆ In print | Welcome and information in bulletin |
| ◆ Physical plant | Stroller “parking” – signage |

Children’s bulletins, activity sheets, toys, etc.

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| ◆ Are they effective? | Age appropriate! (Share examples) |
| ◆ How do we implement them? | Experiment, re-evaluate |

Congregational attitudes toward children in worship

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| ◆ What are they? | “Children should be seen and not heard.” |
| ◆ How can they change? | More exposure!!! |

Sharing our own scenarios:

- ◆ How can we effect change in our churches?

Some Affirmations to Offer

“Children are the future of the church” – is a *myth*!!!! Children are the church *right now*! They won’t want anything to do with the church’s future if they aren’t honored today!

“Children need to learn how to behave in church” – Commonly uttered statement!! How do they learn if they don’t have the opportunity to share in worship?

Other stories to share??

Questions / Comments ??

Thanks to Carl Richter for this workshop design.
 Carl is a pastor in the Ohio Conference United Church of Christ and is a United Church Education Consultant for the Middle Atlantic Region.

Helping Children Learn to Worship

By Frank Proctor

Humans, by nature of their creation, are worshiping beings. To worship is a primal habit that we inherit in our genes and also a skill we must develop as we learn and grow. Children, especially, seem to be naturally open to that inner drive to worship. But within our human complexity there is a tendency to close down our soul's whole hearted awe and celebration. We all have to "learn" how to be more active and involved with our God given yearnings to worship. We have to free ourselves from habits that extinguish our created drive to worship. So, it is appropriate to say we have a need to learn "how" to worship.

If we do not bring children to the public worship with the community of believers, we shut and lock the doors to their natural inclinations of awe and praise. If we fail to help children learn how to worship within the sanctuary, we rob them of their God given appetite to be worshiping beings. If children and youth have never, or only rarely, participated in the worship services of the church, it is unlikely that they will find it meaningful or heartwarming. They will not know that there can be moments of serendipitous joy or inspiration. They will miss the occasions that provoke surprise, wonder, praise and thanks.

Is it any wonder that when we invite our youth to be in worship, after they have not grown up within the worshiping community, that they cannot appreciate the worship service? So they call it "boring." They don't understand what is going on. They don't know to expect moments of quiet insight or episodes of joy or occasions when their assumptions on the meaning of life are challenged and changed. None of this is likely to happen when they lack experience or fail to learn: this vacuum prevents them from understanding or appreciating or knowing how to worship.

What the Church Can Do To Help Children Enjoy Worship

Begin a gradual process to introduce children to our worship. Bit by bit they can begin to understand and practice the ingredients of worship. Little by little they can learn to find meaning in the actions of worship. Many congregations have been working in recent years to find more ways to help children feel like they can be full participants in the liturgical life of the church. Some find their efforts have been unappreciated and unsatisfactory; maybe they brought children into the full hour of service all at once and have not prepared children and families for worship. This "all or nothing" approach could hold the seeds of our own defeat. Each congregation should begin a gradual process of including children in worship.

The four-year to seven-year-olds seem to do best when they spend up to 10 or 20 minutes in the worship before leaving the sanctuary for guided activities. On special occasions like Christmas Eve, Palm Sunday or other active and vibrant services even these younger children may be able to stay for the whole service.

Third through fifth graders are ready to stay much longer. Some can handle up to 30 minutes of worship and will stay longer if they have some learning activities, such as a book to read or a children's bulletin or packet of crayons or quiet activities. This can occupy those moments when their attention on the visible actions begins to fail during the portions of the service that are designed only for listening. Some congregations have become very creative in finding ways to help make the worship more "child friendly" for these children. More can be done.

Youth from the fifth grade and older do quite well fully participating in most all of the adult actions of the worship service. Yet they will be more interested to join all the work of the people of God, as the word liturgy suggests, when the worship leaders and planners have taught the meaning and importance of each part of the liturgy. They also do better when they are invited to be leaders. Some roles where youth can lead would include: reading the scriptures, serving as acolytes, greeters or ushers, helping with the sound system, or performing music. Our imagination is the only limit to what they might do.

Parents play a key role in helping prepare children to understand how to participate in worship.

What Parents Can Do to Help Their Children Enjoy Worship

Teach the Traditions

Before children attend worship on a regular basis teach them to memorize the parts of the service that occur over and over. For many churches this involves saying “The Lord’s Prayer” and singing the “Doxology” or other responses. For other traditions it also includes such parts as the church’s creeds or Affirmations of Faith. Teach them how to read the poetry of the stanzas of hymns, showing how the verses skip from stave to stave in the hymnal and do not simply follow from one line to the next.

O, Say Can You See

Try sitting down in the front of the sanctuary so your children can better see all the movement that is going on. It is no wonder that small children get bored when they can only watch the back of someone’s head or a dark wooden pew. Try using a booster seat for small children; these seats can be placed on the pew for the times they are interested and active. When their attention span begins to fade the boosters can be placed under the pew.

Check It Out

When you arrive for the service each week point out any new item you see that would interest your child. Let them look for such things as new banners, new colors for the liturgical season, special music to be performed, the names in the bulletin that shows a friend will be participating in the leadership of the service.

Help Them Read Along with the Adults

For children who are beginning to read you could be sure to get a large print bulletin if your congregation provides them; that may be easier for your child to follow the steps of the service. During the period before the service begins you could number the parts of the liturgy so that child can check off each part as the service progresses.

Let the Children Help

Encourage your child to find the page numbers for the hymns and scripture for the whole family to see. They can get the bulletins for each family member and place the offering in the trays as they are passed. Some children can print the family names and address on any registration cards or pads your congregation might use.

Reward Good Behavior

Occasionally bring a “surprise” for your child to be given during the worship period: e.g. a piece of quiet candy, a new book, some scratch paper with fluorescent crayons, or a paperback puzzle book.

Share Your Family

From time to time, invite one of your child’s favorite church school friends to sit with your family. You might even exchange families on some Sundays. Some churches have a program to “adopt a grandparent” who might sit with your children.

Say It Out Loud When You Enjoy the Worship

What is the quality of your comments and your feelings about worship? What do your children most often hear from you? Do they hear your positive feelings or do they only hear about your disappointments and frustrations? Remember, they learn quickly from the examples that parents exhibit. If you usually sound “cranky” about church, can you expect them to learn to feel otherwise?

Let Your Conversations Teach

Use your ride home in the car, your dinner conversations or your car pool times throughout the week to remind them of anything funny, curious, interesting, or sad that happened in the worship service the last time you attended. Teach them how the service is not boring all the time.

There is much to be learned by educators and church leaders about helping children appreciate their worship life. One important focus for our future learning is how we might better enable parents to help their children learn to enjoy the worship of the church and learn to become faithful worshipers

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What Children Can Teach Us about Worship

By Frank Proctor

It always lifts my heart to speak with the children at the Moment for Children during worship services. Their bright faces and ready smiles charm me. My own worship is enriched. So, when I stop to think about it, I realize that we could all learn more about how to worship God, as the scriptures tell us “in spirit and in truth,” if we took our cues from the children. I believe that children have a lot to teach us about our attitudes and aptitudes for worship. What can children teach us about worship? Here are some suggestions.

1 Come to worship with an attitude of curiosity. Remember how children are always ready with questions about what is happening or why we are doing what we are doing. That is a good attitude for all of us to have. Come to worship with a readiness to learn something new, to understand something better or to grasp the meaning of something that was previously confusing. Have your eyes wide open to see and your mind wide open to discover.

2 Come to worship with an attitude of expectancy. When a child comes into the sanctuary pulling on the hand of a parent, dragging them reluctantly away from an extended conversation with a friend, they signal to all of us that we, too, ought to be ready to get in our places and be prepared to participate and listen.

3 Come to worship with the energy of all your body. Sometimes parents or grandparents get anxious that a child's body has to be in perpetual motion especially when tradition suggests calm and quiet at worship. Still, we could probably benefit from more intense involvement with our whole mind, soul and body as we respond to urges of our arms and hands, legs and feet. Just the simple act of raising your head with a smile on your face for prayer or singing teaches that worship involves that whole self. The gentle hug or handshake

when greeting friends or visitors brings vitality to our claim that “God is love.” Looking up around at windows, paraments, banners, or other decorations adds zest to our experience.

4 Come to worship with all your emotions. It only takes a little bump or bang to trigger a child's whimper or tears. Just as readily a giggle will pop out of the mouth of the kid whose frown is returned by the wrinkled nose of an adult. We would be better blessed in worship if we admitted to ourselves when we are feeling sad and need nurture, we are better gifted by worship when we give expression to our joys and let out our giggles. Our experience would be more genuine if we were in closer touch with our emotions and not so inclined to suppress the feelings of worship.

5 Come to worship knowing that we belong. The child that feels at home enough to sleep through the announcements or draw pictures during the scripture readings or climb down off daddy's lap during the offering must know that they are welcome, they are accepted and they are cherished. Even adults could learn a better lesson about worship if we acknowledged with our bodies and with our emotions that we are acceptable in God's sight even if we misbehave in our lives. Maybe if we are as accepting of other adults as we are of our children, we would all begin to accept into our hearts that we are God's.

When we remember the words of Jesus, “unless you come with the heart and the innocence of a child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” we must take note of the child's perspective. To be sure, there are some things that children can teach us about worship.

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