



Children and Families in Worship:

Two Perspectives

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” *Mark 9:37*



Dear Reader,

This resource includes two perspectives on the theme of children and families. In this resource, writers share their perspectives on the role of children and families in worship. These pieces address ministry and development of special family worship opportunities, and the possibilities for the inclusion of children in Holy Communion.

"Steps To Planning Family Worship", is the first article in this resource. The author, Church Educator Betsy Woodward, first presented this material as a workshop for the Association of United Church Educators' 2002 gathering in Baltimore, Maryland. In this article, Betsy shares the simple and direct steps that were most helpful as she and the Congregational Church of San Mateo engaged in the planning of Family Worship Services. Woodward, in partnership with the pastor and other leadership of the congregation, plans six Family Worship services for the church year. With the guidance of the Family Worship Committee, both children and youth plan the services. Younger children read the prayers written by the older children and youth. Occasionally, books that include appropriate prayers are used as a source of the prayers that are read by younger children. The youth of the congregation are invited to give semiannual sermons.

The second article "What About Including Children in Communion?" briefly summarizes the theological and practical reasons for the potential inclusion of children in Holy Communion, in this piece, I follow my reflections with a listing of the meanings of Christ's Supper for children and adults. The article makes no recommendations. It simply presents the reasons for engaging in a reflective conversation regarding the faith development of children as it relates to their possible inclusion in the Service of Holy Communion.

There are many settings for education and the spiritual formation of children. The family and the congregation are two important ones. As you read and reflect on the presentations offered on these pages, we pray that you will find practical and faith-filled suggestions for welcoming children and families into the worship life of the local church.

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STEPS TO PLANNING FAMILY WORSHIP

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I. A VIEW OF FAMILY WORSHIP: HOW WE BEGAN AND WHY

Eleven years ago, our church began Family Worship Sundays. On these Sundays, children and youth write the liturgy, read the scripture and are the worship traders. This practice has transformed our church.

There are at least three important reasons to involve children in worship. The first reason is **theological**. When Jesus says, "Let the children come," our congregation believes that he is saying that children belong in the worshiping community. The worship service is the heart of our church life and we think, that children need to be **included and welcomed so that they learn that they belong**.

The second reason is **developmental**. Recent understandings of child development theory make it clear that children learn from the moment of birth, if not before. They are open to their environment taking in sensory information every moment. We take our infants everywhere, yet some say "children don't belong in church." God comes to us at all ages and all stages. With their innocence, children are often more open to the mystery, to the glorious music and the candles in our worship environment. God comes to those who are fidgety, curious, and talkative as well as those who are quiet and serene. Children's spiritual life grows through experiencing God in worship. The third reason is **evangelical**. If young families do not feel their children are welcomed and belong in the church environment, they will not stay. Family worship makes the sanctuary an accepting space for children and also takes their involvement to a deeper level. Children and youth are actually learning about worship, writing their own prayers and leading the worship service. Through this experience, they know deep within their hearts, that they belong in the sanctuary.

II. PREPARING YOUR CHURCH FOR THE PROCESS

Educational process: Discuss with your church bodies the concept of involving children

1. more fully in the worship service several times a year. Offer opportunities for members to come and discuss this new concept.
2. **Intentional and careful planning:** Choose your worship services carefully and plan carefully so that the worship services are meaningful for both children and adults.
3. **Develop partners in the process:** Staff members need to be partners in preparing the service. Involve the ministers of music, pastors, and church school teachers in preparing for the worship service.
4. **Choose logical services for Family Worship:** Choose services where families would ordinarily attend - Thanksgiving, Christmas Pageant, Palm Sunday, Easter, Mothers Day.
5. **Practice, practice, practice:** Bring the children and youth who are leading the service into the sanctuary to practice with the microphones.

III. WAYS OF INVOLVING CHILDREN

Limited involvement: Candle lighters, ushers, choirs, design bulletin covers.

- 1.
2. **Greater involvement:** Call to Worship, unison prayers, Invocations, Scripture reading.
3. **Involvement in writing liturgy:** Writing prayers and litanies.
4. **Involvement in designing and leading the entire worship service:** Youth write their own service, including sermons, serving communion, songs, pastoral prayers, benediction.
5. **Begin in the younger grades with limited involvement and move to greater involvement with older youth:** 7th - 8th grade and high school youth can easily write and lead an entire worship service.

IV. A FEW OTHER SPECIFICS

1. **Family Worship Committee-** This committee is composed of the church school teacher whose class is involved in reading or writing the prayers and participating in the service. The church educator or designated person whose role is to coordinate the preparation of the special Family Worship Bulletin, the pastor and the minister of music complete this planning team. This committee will provide the order of worship for the services and the prayers and litanies will be placed within this framework. The rehearsal for each service and the solicitation of a volunteer adult to sit with the young worship leaders is also the role of this team.
2. **The Family Worship Bulletin-** While the preparation of this piece will be coordinated by a member of the Family Worship Committee, the covers may be designed by the children of the church.
3. **Young Children-** Children between the ages of 6 years to 7 years may read or memorize hort prayers instead of writing them. There are many resources that include prayers that are appropriate for this purpose. The prayers that young children read may also be written by older children and youth.
4. **Youth-**The youth and older children of the church are invited to write and then assisted in writing prayers and litanies. Twice a year a senior high youth is invited to preach at the Family Worship Service and children of varying ages serve as liturgists.

As a result, it has been the experience of Congregational Church of San Mateo, that when these steps to planning Family Worship are followed, children and youth emerge as excellent worship leaders. Families come to hear their children and church attendance tends to increase for these services. Most importantly, children and youth begin to believe that they belong in the sanctuary. Having been welcomed as full participants in the community of faith, it is our hope that they will be more likely to return to the church as adults or make worship a regular part of their adult lives wherever they reside.

**A Liturgy Written by the Children and Youth
of the
Congregational Church of San Mateo, San Mateo, California**

SPOKEN INTROIT:

One: Climbing High, reaching for the sky.

One: Jumping in puddles, laughing so merrily.

One: Rolling in tickling green grass, dizzy with joy.

All: The exuberance of children; God's pure delight.

One: Singing out loud and dancing wildly.

One: Running or toddling, legs all a blur.

One: Hugging and sharing, faces aglow.

All: The joy of children: A blessing from God and a reason to sing!

CHORAL INTROIT:

God bless families everywhere, loving people who truly care,

Kind and giving in all they do, they let the love shine through.

God bless families far and near, homes of happiness, hearts of cheer,

Like the family Jesus knew, they let the love shine through!

God bless families old. God bless families new,

Made of people like me and you.

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Leader: We gather here at this time as family, the family of God,

People: We are here: members, friends and visitors guiding young people in God's way.

Leader: We are here: children, youth and young adults, with hope and enthusiasm for our future.

People: We are here: parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents and senior member of our congregation, who are connected with many generations of family.

Leader: Today we all gather as children of God to be open to God's message to us.

All: Let our eyes and ears be open to God's word that lives from generation to generation.

Litany of Concerns:

(written by 7th and 8th grade youth)

*Young liturgist: Dear God, I wish that Bosnians, Croatians and Serbians would sit down without weapons and talk about their problems. Then, when the talking is over, they would walk out, shaking hands instead of fighting.

All: Hear our Prayer, Oh Lord.

Young liturgist: Dear Lord, your children are in danger. They are fighting in a battle with the world filled with right and wrong. They don't know what they are doing, or some do and are making the wrong choices. They need a warm place to stay that you provide, a hot meal you give, and a soft pillow to rest their heads on. But instead of living in the good they are living in the bad. Help the children. Lord.

All: Hear our Prayer, Oh Lord.

Young liturgist: In Mexico, families sit on the border crosswalks and beg for money and food. The poverty in Mexico is too high. God please help the poor in Mexico so their country will be a better place. I pray for them, O Lord.

All: Hear our Prayer, Oh Lord.

Young liturgist: Lord, the environment is suffering, though we are deaf to it's cries. People are suffering so they can not care for the world. Lord, though the problems are many, our environment needs attention too. Help us to realize our destruction to our home and help us to care for our earth.

Hear our Prayer, Oh Lord.

All:

Young liturgist: Please God help us to be more compassionate toward our less fortunate brothers and sisters. Help the homeless to get back on their feet by giving them food to eat, clothes to wear and a roof over their heads. We need to be kind to them and realize that many of the homeless are trying hard but their attempts are not accepted.

****All: Come by here my Lord, Kum ba Yah**

Come by here my Lord, Kum ba Yah

Come by here, my Lord, Kum ba yah

Oh Lord, Kum ba yah,

CLOSING PRAYER

* Names of the children or youth who served as liturgists were written in this space.

** This is the chorus to the traditional African American spiritual "Kum ba Yah" or "Come By Here"

**Faith Development of Children:
What About Including Children in Communion?**

Rev. Dr. Carolyn Landers Pettigrew, D.Min.

The theological and practical reasons for including children in corporate worship provide the basis for including them in the Supper of Jesus Christ. Children's participation in this sacrament is based on their faith and trust, rather than extensive theological understanding. Young children can be nurtured in the trust and grace of God, and can come to the Communion Table with a sense of belonging and of receiving. Their presence helps the congregation to act as a koinonia (community) called into being by Jesus Christ.

There are three meanings of Christ's Supper which young children can begin to comprehend, and three which older children can understand: **In Christ's Supper or Communion**

- **God's People share a meal together as God's family.**
- **We say "thank you" to God.**
- **We remember Jesus.**
- **God gives us God's love and forgiveness.**
- **We give ourselves to God.**
- **We receive hope for the future.**

Jesus Blesses the Children:

"People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom as a little child will never enter it." *Luke 18:15-17*