

## **Intergenerational Worship**

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- *Children asked at Passover, “Why is this night different from all other nights?”*
- *All ages listened together as Joshua renews the covenant with God*
- *Solomon blessed the Temple for all ages*
- *Nehemiah rebuilt the Jerusalem wall for all ages.*
- *Jesus blessed children.*
- *Pentecost as Joel foretold was of sons and daughters prophesying and old men dreaming dreams.*

In the Bible, God’s people have always included all ages in worship.

Today’s churches, however, offer more options. Some churches still have everyone from newborn to people with dementia in the sanctuary together. Others peg the worship hour according to age, ranging from nursery or children’s worship for young children to separate services for youngsters, middle schoolers, older teens, and college students.

“There’s no one simple solution to a very complex set of circumstances,” says Howard Vanderwell, who’s editing a book about intergenerational worship.

He defines intergenerational worship as “worship in which people of every age are understood to be equally important. Each and all are the church of now.” Vanderwell suggests that even if your church has chosen a more age-divided approach to worship, you can use the intergenerational worship concept to identify problems and find worship ideas.

### **All Ages Present**

Intergenerational worship has all ages present—embodying the truth that the whole church is the body of Christ.

“Unity is a gift of Christ. Unity is and it needs to be maintained,” Vanderwell says.

Naturally, though, people ask what to do with the young ones.

“Nobody ever talks or debates about whether adults should be in worship. But we do debate whether children should be heard or seen in worship. Yet God’s continuing self-revelation is not age-specific. Your children may experience a relationship with God long before they can articulate it,” says Steve Burger, director of children and family ministries in the Evangelical Covenant Church’s Christian formation department.

Worshiping with different generations—singing together, holding hands during prayer, sharing communion— helps children form an identity as people who want to celebrate and glorify God together.

Burger recalls a little girl, who asked, while being led downstairs to Sunday school, “Hey, Daddy, how come I can’t stay upstairs with you and God?” She still needed to learn that God is everywhere present. And Burger is all for separating ages for developmentally appropriate education. But he cautions against sending kids to church school while adults worship.

## **Why Do Churches Organize People By Age?**

First, the 18th century Enlightenment emphasis on reason and education shifted worship from participating in faith to learning about faith. It's the difference between doxology (right praise) and dogmatics (right belief). So if worship is only about believing, and kids are less cognitively developed than adults, then churches want to make sure kids know what to believe before they join the adults.

Second, North American churches have absorbed the culture of consumer choice and target marketing. They advertise to reach families shopping for more church options.

Meanwhile, churches too small to staff children's programs during worship should take heart, according to Faith Communities Today 2005. This survey of 884 randomly sampled U.S. congregations found that keeping children with adults can help churches grow—if they also involve children in worship through speaking, reading, and leading (like singing).

## **Counter-cultural Character Formation**

Though age-groups have their own vocabularies, communication styles, and outlooks—each shaped by particular economic, social, political, and technological realities—Vanderwell cautions against stereotyping or keeping everyone separate. Instead he suggests becoming more intentional about worshiping together. “Where else in our society do we have such a strategic location to examine and foster the relationships of generations?”

“The phrase ‘all generations’ appears 91 times in the Bible. God does not form our character all at once or all by himself. Nor does God expect us to unilaterally form our own character. God acts on us through others. Interaction among generations is necessary for forming faith and character. Each age learns from another,” Vanderwell says.

Steve Burger agrees. “Who or what we choose to exclude from our worship gatherings says as much about our community of faith as who or what we choose to include. And, really, does excluding anyone make sense when you realize we're spending an eternity together?”

Taka Ashida recalls becoming pastor at a Reformed Church of Japan congregation that valued calm and quiet. He discovered that a father with three young sons always stayed in the entrance hall because he'd been told the boys were “so noisy.”

Ashida invited the family into the sanctuary. “They needed us; we needed them. The father was so happy to hear that from me. The boys were not always quiet. Some members accepted them. Some complained.”

Worship forms character that lasts, according to George Aupperlee, who leads worship in dementia units at Holland Home in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “Touch, direct eye contact, and the use of individual names help contribute to warm, personal, interactive worship ... As Jane verbalizes every word of familiar hymns, the Lord's Prayer, and treasured Bible passages, it is evident that grace still flows through well-worn channels to the depths of her soul and keeps faith alive,” he says.

## **Everyone Participates. Everyone Learns.**

Intergenerational worship takes humility as well as intention. Older generations can't lord it over the rest with a “this is how we've always done it” attitude. Neither should worship leaders focus on one or two age-groups

and ignore others.

Robert Nordling, now co-director of Christian formation and orchestra conductor at Calvin College, recalls a tense moment in a former church of mostly college students, plus “90 faithful older members.” A senior music group leader asked for copies of the new songs being sung in church. Too nitpicky? Not at all.

The woman explained, “Every Tuesday we eat lunch together, have a speaker, and then sing for a little while. We find some of the newer music a bit challenging. I thought if we practiced a bit together on Tuesdays, we might be able to participate better on Sundays. Some of those songs seem pretty difficult...to us anyway.”

Nordling says, “In all my years of music ministry, I had seldom witnessed such selfless maturity! This music would never be the favorite of these good people, but somehow that didn’t seem to matter. Their desire to sing as active participants in worship alongside those younger worshipers allowed them to lay aside their own music preferences in deference to others.”

### **Learning Alongside Children**

Grace Episcopal Church, Newton Corner, Massachusetts, got the whole congregation talking about what it means to be a baptizing community.

“We entered into an extended conversation about children at worship—teaching them about their worship tradition, about scripture embodied in the three-year cycle of readings, and particularly about the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.”

“The English Reformation put Anglican liturgy in the language of the people. We asked, ‘What is the vernacular of today’s young people?’ and invited the children and youth to plan Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services,” says Linda J. Clark, music director.

The youth created a Maundy Thursday service that followed ancient forms. Their Good Friday service led people through 10 stations of the cross, including foot washing, the Last Supper, and appropriate Scripture and drama. Worshipers started in the garden, moved throughout the building, and ended in the sanctuary.

“These 20 early teens transfigured ancient patterns. Adults could never have done it! They moved 50 people ranging in age from 2 through 89 through all of this in 40 minutes. Both services are repeatable and will become regular parts of our worship, at least until another group of teens decides to change them,” Clark says.

Beth Ann Gaede, an Alban Institute author and editor, says that when she was a pastor and her denomination introduced a new worship book, she used children’s sermons to teach worship. “It was easy to keep the children engaged, because we moved around the sanctuary—to look at paraments, touch symbols carved in the altar, smell things, or practice a simple liturgical action, response, or song. Of course, the rest of the congregation learned alongside the children, and, gradually, the congregation grew in ‘liturgical literacy,’ ” Gaede says.

### **Age-Inclusive Worship Leading**

Making worship age-inclusive requires that you value participation more than performance. “Having a praise band up front lead 20 minutes of music in a row isn’t necessarily child-friendly. If you do songs here and there throughout, there’s more chance to stand up and sit down.

“It amazes me to see worship leaders sprinkle prayers between chunks of song, but give no opportunity for people to engage in prayer with God,” says Steve Burger, director of children and family ministries in the Evangelical Covenant Church’s Christian formation department.

He suggests planning simple interactive movements into the liturgy. “In one congregation, the pastor would say, at the end of the service, with hands out, ‘The Lord be with you’ and the congregation would open their hands back and reply, ‘And also with you.’ Even a little two-year-old girl could do that. She loved it.”

Kristy Ruthven, who directs worship and youth programs at Princeton Christian Reformed Church, in Kentwood, Michigan, used a survey to involve different ages in leading worship. She asked about interests, regardless of experience. Parents interviewed and filled out surveys for children to young to write. Now these things have happened in worship:

- A preschooler turns pages while her father plays violin.
- Two teens and a 90-year-old former pastor read Scripture at the same service.
- Whole families sing together on praise teams. Other vocal or instrumental teams have mixed ages of unrelated people.
- Evening services sometimes begin with a short sanctuary service. Then all ages gather around tables in the narthex to discuss the morning sermon.

“At first, it was little difficult to get people in older age ranges to participate. They’d say, ‘Well, I’m too old for that...’ or ‘I’ve seen my day...’ or ‘my voice is not strong enough.’ But I started attending the twice-monthly senior soup luncheon to eat, play games, and make friends. Now when I call, they know who I am,” Ruthven says.

When children help lead worship, treat them as peers. Do you (“appreciatively”) laugh at, applaud for, or video adults who sing, read Scripture, or present dramas? “I wonder if we could be missing how our children are trying to lead us by confusing performance and worship. When our responses signal to them that we expect them to be ‘cute’ rather than an intrinsic part of the drama of worship, we may have missed their contribution to the dialogue between God and his people,” says Jan Zuidema, music ministries director at Second Christian Reformed Church in Grand Haven, Michigan.

### **Who Do Words And Images Reflect?**

Intergenerational worship prompts churches to look at everything with new eyes, starting with who’s in the sanctuary or leading worship.

Try drawing on natural gifts of an age-group for leading liturgy sections. In *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, John D. Witvliet suggests, “For a children’s sermon on Psalm 8, instead of doing an object lesson about scientific wonders they can’t comprehend, try call and response. Let the kids lead the congregation.”

The leader says a few words (“Lord, our Lord.”) The kids face worshipers and repeat the phrase. The worshipers echo back. And so it goes in three parts through the whole psalm—“Lord, our Lord...how wonderful...is your name...” Witvliet says this method is almost guaranteed to help everyone experience the psalm’s exuberance.

Howard Vanderwell, who’s editing a book about intergenerational worship, sometimes uses sermons to explain one generation to another. “A message on young Daniel can be a time to remind those who are no longer young what

it's like, the needs youth face, and that they need adults to encourage them. Similarly, a message about the death of Abraham can be a time to speak to adolescents and young parents about concerns older folks have as they reach their declining years.”

Congregational prayers can be led by different ages, or groups, and include joys and struggles from each generation.

“Make sure worship images—whether paintings, stained glass, sculpture, banners, digital images, or church bulletins—are inclusive of the whole body of Christ, not just your congregation,” Burger advises.

Even if children and youth don't attend your worship, Burger offers first steps. “Have the kids with you for a short time when the service begins. At least once a month, have All-Church Sunday. On these Sundays, celebrate communion. Invite children and families to help lead parts of worship. Make it experiential.”