

Creating Space

For Children and Their Families in Worship

Children are a blessing to each worshipping community. The church values the faith formation of our children but that is most often seen in church's offerings from Vacation Bible School to Sunday School. But after years of having children go off to "their own" separate programming and ministry, worship has become an adult only experience for many congregations and continues to be designed with only adults in mind. The Westminster Catechism states, "The chief end of humanity is to glorify God," therefore children need to be included in the full faith community and that community's regular worship experience as an important part of their faith formation.

How do you teach children to read? Simply put, you read to them, guiding and teaching them along the way. How do you teach children to worship? In the same manner, you worship with them, guiding and teaching along the way. Pulling children out of worship to teach them about it or to do something else in hopes that at age 18 they will magically find meaning and value in worship is a model that simply does not work. Faith formation can happen right in the context of worship.

Some Trends and The Why

Have you recognized any of these trends in your own church in the last several years?

- Families prefer to stay together on Sundays, especially in worship.
- Parents take their children to the nursery less and less.
- Families are grateful for one-off faith formation experiences like baptism, communion classes, first Bibles, and other milestones.
- The families that participate frequently usually come to church 1-2 times a month for an hour.
- Sunday School has lower (or no) attendance, and it is often not the same children week to week.
- Families are more scheduled and busier than ever.

If you are nodding your head, you are not alone. Gen X and Millennial parents have had a different way of experiencing meaning and value in the church and even before the pandemic, these trends were on the rise. So often families are pulled in so many directions throughout the week, that when they arrive for worship on a Sunday, they want it to be in a space to be together.

When families worship together, parents and caregivers are given the opportunity to model their faith to their children. And in turn, children model their faith right back, shaping their parents, caregivers, and worshipping community through their presence. Faith formation in children can take place in new and different ways in churches than it has in the past, and that offers the opportunity to be creative and inclusive of children and their families. Worship is at the heart of the Church, so finding ways to make worship more intergenerational, inclusive and educational with children particularly in mind is one way to intentionally offer faith formation to children.

Discerning Why With Leaders and How To Make Space: One Example

This video walks through one example of a traditional PC(USA) church discerning why and how to make space for children and their families in worship and what it looks like. <https://tinyurl.com/5bdx6abw>

Here are reflection questions to ponder with your worship and formation leadership after watching the video:

- What was your own experience in worship as a child or as a parent of a child in worship? What feelings do you remember?
- What fears or reservations do you have about providing a dedicated space for children and families in worship?
- What excites you and energizes you about finding ways to more intentionally make worship inclusive and welcoming to children and families?
- What stood out to you from this example as compelling to try?
- What can you imagine in your sanctuary that looks different or the same?

Ideas Consider and Try

Here are some suggested ideas to consider as you work to include children more fully into the regular worship life of your congregation.

- Try inviting children to stay in worship in for a season, maybe once a month or for the summer. People can best embrace new ideas if they can try it on for a time and experiment. After the season ends, then leaders can evaluate, consider what was learned and how they might best proceed.
- Look for a place in your sanctuary to add a family worship space that gives children proximity to see, hear and participate in worship.
- During the Children's Time give the children activities to do back in the space or where they are sitting with their family.
- Plan a rotation of volunteers put out activities for children and even help create them.
- Collaborate with worship leadership and pastor(s) to include children in other parts of worship. For example:
 - Have a prayer that uses other senses like a body prayer, drawing a picture prayer or looking at something in the space
 - Invite the children to help usher, greet and collect offerings
 - Pose a question in the sermon and give all, including children, a moment to answer or reflect
 - Invite children to gather closer to see baptisms or other special experiences in worship
 - For children who do not read yet and cannot sing hymns, invite them to dance, ribbon twirl, or clap during a hymn
 - Invite children to be lay readers, serve communion, play/sing a musical offering in worship, be part of a procession, lead the passing of the peace.
- Invite the children to lead a mission project as part of a worship offering, like collect food for a pantry or socks for the homeless, or school supplies for the neighborhood school.
- Invite children to share art in worship by drawing the bulletin cover or hanging their work.
- Invite adults (who are not parents or primary caregivers) and youth, to join the family worship space periodically for mentoring and extra support.
- Provide appropriate activities and items for worship that are faith based, like picture books of Bible stories, liturgical season appropriate activities, not only toys.
- If you aren't quite ready to make a dedicated children's space, think about what can you do to your existing space to ensure kids can see, hear and feel included.

Ideas could include:

 - Reserve front pews/seats for children
 - Offer cushions to make kids sit higher
 - Invite children to kneel on pews or chairs for particular parts of worship
 - Have a glider or rocker for soothing our youngest worshippers in the room
 - Provide bags with activities for children to engage with in the pew
- During worship or just before it, invite families to learn about an aspect of worship like learning how to use a hymnal, what is communion, what do we do when it's a prayer time, etc. That way children are in the sanctuary and can immediately put their learnings into practice.

- If you have childcare/nursery, invite those children into worship for the last hymn to get used to being in the space and experience a small part of worship.

Allow The Children To Come To Me

Some people brought children to Jesus so that he would place his hands on them and pray. But the disciples scolded them. "Allow the children to come to me," Jesus said. "Don't forbid them, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to people like these children." CEB

When thinking of making worship more inclusive for children and families, Matthew 19:13-14 jumps to mind. And yet for many it is easier to just think worship is for adults, and children can leave worship to have age specific programming. While certainly there are times when it makes sense to have adult programming and children's programming, worship should be and can be a place where children are included as an integral part of the faith community. Children have some different needs than adults but with a few adjustments, worship services can better welcome children to worship God.

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October 2021



Office of Christian
Formation

