

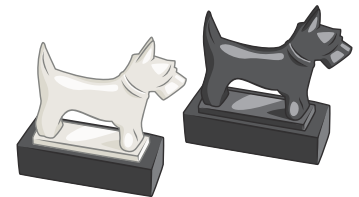
All Ages, One Body

WELCOMING CHILDREN INTO WORSHIP

by Jayne Byler

How do children worship God? Can they learn and be formed by participating in the worshiping community? Many churches have traditionally said, “Yes! Children belong in worship!” As culture changes and churches adjust to new realities, *how* we include children in worship is newly relevant.

I remember when the only appropriate activities in worship for children were the handkerchief bunnies your mother would make or the Scottie dog magnets that scooted along the bulletin. In worship, children were expected to be quiet, sit still, and well—be little adults.



Then came the movement of adding a children’s time, children’s church, children’s activity bags, craft tables, or child-appropriate activities within the worship time. Some of these practices separate the children from adults, whether in another room for separate activities or during children’s time when they are the focus of all the adult eyes.

As a pastor, I ponder whether these practices are helpful in shaping the spiritual health of our younger ones. Or are they simply trends that make it easier for the adults to go through worship without being bothered? I wonder what people of all ages are learning about what it means to be in the body of Christ with its glorious diversity of age, ability, culture, and stories.



The congregation I currently pastor is like many these days: aging, shrinking, holding on to what is dear in our theology while struggling to discern what is no longer essential. Since Covid, we have lost much of our programming for children and youth. Yet in the past year we have seen an uptick in the number of children in worship.

So it raises the question again, what do we do with our children in worship? How do we include them in a way that is age-sensitive, interesting, engaging, instructive and yet does not single them out as either too disruptive to remain in the room or a showcase of cuteness?

Every week is an opportunity to learn more. One guideline I am following is to not limit certain activities to specific age groups. This means inviting adults to do activities traditionally reserved for children and inviting children to do activities traditionally reserved for adults. Another guideline is to constantly be alert to practices that allow children to be children in worship—and to see this not as disturbance but to appreciate what children have to offer.

We have added a table in the back of the sanctuary with creative supplies, markers, beads, clay, origami paper, and chenille stems (also known as pipe cleaners). On the table is a sign offering it all for children and other creative people to use during worship. I encourage people of all ages to use these things to create something as part of worship. Sometimes we will offer a prompt of how these art pieces might reflect the theme or scripture for the morning and designate a table where they can be shared.



If we read a children's book in worship, we encourage anyone who desires to see the pictures to move to the front.

During sharing time, children are invited to share their own personal joys or concerns. Children are occasionally asked to help read scripture as they feel comfortable, and for Advent, households representing varying ages will light the Advent candles.

Even though there is order and routine in our worship, children are free to get up and move to get items as they wish. For the Christmas season, I will add a giant nativity mural coloring page to a table in the sanctuary for them to work on each week.

Covid taught us to let go of what isn't working and to appreciate the adventure of finding new rituals of belonging that are flexible enough to move with the changes in the congregation.

As we consider how to include children in worship, there is no magic formula. No one practice will transfer to every congregation easily. What is more helpful is to pay attention to the way our practices form the faith of our children, and how children in turn transform the life of our worshiping community.

I see the movement and voice and spirit of children not as something to be tolerated until they are old enough to behave better. Instead, they are a reminder of the unpredictability and spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit. The energy of children is only one—yet equally one—way the Spirit reveals God's love, hospitality, and grace.

Jayne Byler is a mother of three, grandmother of two, and pastor of Stahl Mennonite Church, the fourth congregation she has served in a 37-year career. She lives with her daughter's family in southwestern Pennsylvania.