

# Some Thoughts on All Ages Worship

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What I mean by 'all ages worship':

Worship that intentionally engages people of all ages in encountering God through a variety of ways—intergenerational, where young and old worship together. NOT children's worship, where adults prepare things for kids or adults sit in...don't dumb down...just the planning is different.

One person has defined intergenerational worship as "worship in which people of every age are understood to be equally important. Each and all are the church of now." (Howard Vanderwell)

What is the value?

Reflect on these quotes:

"Unless churches make a point of planning inclusive worship services, people at both ends of the age spectrum often get left out of the songs, prayers and sermons." (Carolyn C Brown)

"Children of any age can worship. They may not worship in the same way or at the same cognitive level as adults, but they still worship." "Children and youth participate their way into faith. They form their identities as Christians unconsciously, through the liturgy (work) of the worship in which they participate. Understanding starts at the level of impression and awareness, and experience precedes rational understanding, so children are learning whether or not they are able to verbalize that learning." (Jean Floyd Love)

*It's easier to 'meet needs' of worshippers when you focus on only 1 age group...*

Including all ages in worship is part of a larger worship question than simply including children in worship. It causes you to critically examine all aspects of worship. There is more to think about than just ages.

Challenges you may encounter:

- Lack of vision
- 'token' buy-in...'we should do this' but there's not really a lot of motivation to make it work or perhaps no idea of how to do it
- Getting everyone on board
- Parents! You might need to start with working with parents on catching the vision for this. I've encountered the greatest resistance to this from parents who 'don't want to look after their child...want their own time to worship'

Just having kids in service doesn't constitute all ages worship. It is difficult to do well, it takes a lot of work in planning and preparing for it, and it's a challenge to engage adults and children.

Don't worry about perfection—flexibility is important if you're leading the service

Won't it be distracting and disruptive to have children in worship?

Yes of course if your intent is children sit quietly. Most worship services are not designed for children but to conclude from that fact that they don't belong is the wrong conclusion in my opinion...this is why we need to critically think through this. All ages worship takes humility as well as intention.

From one minister (Fairless) "The question shifted from 'What do I like for worship style and music?' to 'How can we design music, tell Bible stories, and do prayers to engage all ages within the framework of the Episcopal tradition?'"

Another quote to reflect on:

"Worship is the heart of the congregation. Everyone has different interests, such as pastoral care or missions, but in worship you build community. Children need to see themselves as part of a community of all ages who share commitments." (Carolyn C Brown)

## HOW DO WE DO THIS??

So, let's get practical now...what does this look like? What elements go into it?

First of all, it's important to have the same vision and values for 'adult' worship as for 'children' in worship. For example what is your vision? Is it encountering God's presence, having a tangible experience of God's love, expectation of the Holy Spirit to be present and for worshippers to experience the Holy Spirit?

Described by one person, all ages worship is "like a Pixar movie". It is multi-layered—engages children, teens and adults.

Some practical tips:

Choose a single theme and unpack it in various ways

Have a variety of music (according to your church's practice) ie. children, contemporary, hymns

Make it visual! Consider all the senses!

Make it participative

Make it interactive

It is important to pick a theme that has depth but also is understandable to everyone. What's the main point? What is it saying about God? About us? How does it relate to people? What opportunities does it provide for 'special elements' in the service? This doesn't have to radically differ from the usual order of service. In fact it might be best to stick close to the usual liturgy if possible but have the changes reflect a more inclusive way of carrying out your liturgy.

During the worship service consider giving more explanation of various elements, use simple language, make sure everyone can see what's happening, provide opportunity for interaction and 'programmed' movement for everyone not just children. Have visuals, various ages represented in leading different aspects of the service, have a 'take away' task/application, short message.

**SIMPLE!!!** But simple doesn't mean easy! It's hard work to do this well!

Be prepared and prepare parents of young children especially that not all parts will necessarily engage or interest younger ones, they need to be prepared for that. Encourage parents to keep their children with them in the pews. It's important there's space for young ones to ask parents to explain parts they don't understand and that parents and children worship alongside one another. Parents of very young children may want to have quiet activities...personally I don't provide any myself because I don't want to teach that when you're 'bored' in worship you do something else to 'entertain'. I let parents make the choice for what will work for their own situation. It's important to learn, even from a young age what worship is really all about and not perpetuate this 'consumer' mentality.

Another tip: Emphasize 'faith family' rather than 'traditional' family...again don't want to be exclusive!

As you think about how you might introduce all ages worship or make changes to the way your worship is, have a 'big picture' or end result in mind, then break it down to steps needed to get there...start small and work towards goal.

Final questions to consider:

What matters most? Do the patterns of our worship really matter more than the inclusion of all the members of our community? Does excluding anyone make sense when you realize we're spending eternity together?

If you want to explore this topic further, you will find more resources at

[cboqkids.ca](http://cboqkids.ca)

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