

# Welcoming Children, Welcoming All

Kathy Dawson

**I**t was Sunday morning and Julia, age five, was awake before the rest of the family. Her Sunday church clothes were laid out on the dresser in her room, and she began to get dressed hoping that this Sunday would bring her a church like the one she had gone to before her family moved to this new community. Hope Community Church had felt like home. Everyone knew her name. They smiled at her when her family arrived. The pastor looked her in the eyes at the end of the service and shook her hand and told her how glad they were to have her there. She knew many of the songs because they were simple and easy to sing. The church did not mind that she liked to move to the music and would sometimes dance in the aisles if it was one of her favorite songs. She loved her old church.

So far her family had not found a church like Hope Community Church in this new city. They had visited a different church each Sunday. There was always something not quite right. Some older adults at one church had rolled their eyes and looked angrily at her and her family when she started to dance to one of her favorite hymns. In other churches it was hard for her to find the bathroom when she needed one, and no one seemed willing to help. Some churches had times when children left worship, and she did not know where to go and was afraid of leaving her mother in these strange churches. At Hope Community Church there had always been drawing materials available for the children, but if she wanted to draw in most of these churches, she had to use offering envelopes or church bulletins and the small pencils that were in the pews.

Julia hoped the church they were going to this Sunday would be the one that would welcome her and her family. She was getting tired of trying on new church homes and just wanted to find one where she and her family could feel that they belonged. After all, Jesus had welcomed the children. She had heard this story many times, but why did not Jesus' followers today do this, as well?

In this article we will explore the reasons for engaging children like Julia in worship and explore some of the many ways that churches are offering hospitality to children and their families. In welcoming the children, they are finding that they are creating worship experiences that people of all ages and abilities can participate in and flourish.

## Biblical Mandates for Children in Worship

### Jesus Welcomes the Children

Let us begin with the story that Julia was thinking about above. How does Jesus welcoming children translate to children's participation and engagement with corporate worship in their local congregation? My favorite version of this passage is Luke's account in Luke 18:15-17. I have always gravitated to this text because it is the only version of the story to include "even infants" among those who are with Jesus. Most of the illustrations of this text focus on older children surrounding and listening to Jesus. Infants are left out of the picture, although you might find a toddler on Jesus' lap.

How does this translate to the church setting? What is the age that your church feels comfortable

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having children in the midst of the congregation at worship? If a family brings their infant or toddler to church, what type of reception will they receive? Will there be eye rolling and dirty looks if the child makes noise in the service, or are people happy to welcome even the youngest into the worship space? Dr. Lynne Pabst, who serves at Grove Presbyterian Church in Danville, Pennsylvania, has done considerable work on the place of infants in worship and advocates for being attentive to how they express their emotions through bodily movements and expressions even before words are evident. She encourages infant massage as a way of families connecting with their young ones in the pew.

Beyond the infants in Luke's passage there are others who get left out of artists' renderings in this scene of Jesus' welcome of the children. These are the ones who bring the children to Jesus. Where are the parents and guardians, older siblings, grandparents, and others who bring children to encounter God through Jesus Christ? One artist who has incorporated these folks into the scene is Paul Oman. I have started using his painting titled *Jesus Welcomes the Children* when I talk to other adults about this passage. In this painting the artist shows Jesus walking away from the viewer surrounded by a wide array of people of different ages as they joyfully head to the new creation beyond the cross. It is not so much a capturing of the earthly Jesus' relationship with children as it is a look at the hope of a world where all are welcome to come along in the spiritual journey.

What does this concept mean for corporate worship? It means that we should not be attentive just to the child in isolation, but to the family unit as a whole. How are we supporting parents? When are we supporting parents? Are we walking alongside them before the baby is even born or only at baptism? Do we help to scaffold the time between baptism or infant dedication to adulthood by marking milestones along the way in faith-filled ways? Since we are all children of God, this marking of milestones continues into adulthood and older adulthood, so that all are welcomed as we welcome children.

## **Other Passages of Scripture Speaking to Children's Inclusion in the Worshipping Body**

In addition to Jesus welcoming children, other passages within the biblical witness make the case

for children's engagement with worship. We find passages in the Old Testament where children are included in hearing the reading of the law. The most famous of these is probably Deuteronomy 6:7, where parents and others are admonished to recite the words of the law to their children and keep them ever before them in their homes and beyond. We can find passages in the New Testament epistles where whole households are baptized by the disciples, such as Acts 16:15. For purposes of this article, however, I would like to stay with the Gospels, where Jesus directly interacts with children or is a child himself.

It is this latter idea of Jesus being a child that brings us to the nativity of Jesus. Jesus begins life as an infant with a family in transition who, like Julia and her family, has come to a new town. What kind of reception does this family receive? Who welcomes, who turns away from this family in search of sanctuary? Who visits this family when the baby is born?

Amy Lindeman Allen, in her recent book titled *The Gifts They Bring: How Children in the Gospels Can Shape Inclusive Ministry*,<sup>2</sup> makes the point that some of the shepherds who visited Jesus in his feed trough bed were likely children. It is not unusual in many cultures even today for the youngest children to be caring for the sheep and goats—think of David, the youngest of the brothers, tending the sheep when Samuel came looking for a possible king to replace Saul (1 Sam. 16:11). So, the Christmas pageants within many churches in which children put on robes and pretend to be shepherds may actually be more accurate in their portrayal of this scene than most artwork and Nativity sets, which depict adult shepherds encountering the Holy Family.

What would it mean in our churches' corporate worship services to acknowledge that children were among the first to see Jesus at his birth? How might this change a congregation's thinking about the inclusion of children in the worship of God currently?

Beyond these stories of inclusion of children there are also passages that speak to children's leadership of worship. Jesus, himself, is taken seriously by the priests and scribes in the temple when he is only a boy (Luke 2:46–47). He both asks questions and answers them in his conversations with these adults.

There is the boy who shares his lunch with the assembled crowds in John 6:9 and the child whom Jesus stands in the middle of the disciples as a model

of faith (Matt. 18:1-5). These passages and others point to the ability that children have of leadership in faith communities, not just as pew sitters but as those who take an active role in worship leadership.

The Bible frequently uses the words "little ones" in passages like these, and we are admonished not to be stumbling blocks to these (Matt. 10:42, 18:6). These words can refer not only to children who are young in age but also to any people who are marginalized and overlooked. This is when welcoming children becomes more than focusing on young kids but is expanded to other groups who are vulnerable and sometimes excluded. Welcoming children becomes a welcome for all and a welcome for Jesus in our worship.

## Intergenerational Worship: What Does It Look Like?

If we truly want to welcome all in worship, then we need to start thinking differently about how we structure worship, so that all can participate and lead. It may begin with the words that we use in worship. What is the reading level of our liturgies and spoken prayers that are incorporated into our service? Are there ways that we can incorporate simpler words and repeated congregational responses that are meaningful for all and readily understood? The Iona Community heard their worshipers request for simpler language and as a result developed numerous prayers and liturgies that are easily understood without sacrificing the depth of theology that many adults crave. Here is an example for an opening response to a communion service:

Leader: With nature in its power and beauty,  
with rain and wind and sunshine,  
with the ancient rocks and the budding  
flower,  
All: **we gather in praise to God.**  
Leader: With believers and seekers the whole  
world wide, with people in every land,  
and speakers of every language,  
All: **we gather in praise to God.**  
Leader: With the angels and saints in heaven  
. . . with all who have worshiped in  
this place,  
All: **we gather in praise to God.**  
Leader: With Jesus who promised his presence,  
and the Spirit who showers her  
blessings,  
All: **we gather in praise to God.**

Leader: Here let heaven and earth embrace,  
All: **here may God's people find home.**<sup>2</sup>

Notice how the responses of the congregation use simple words and are repetitive. The words of the leader evoke images that children and others can readily understand.

There are also resources for children as liturgists in worship. A number of books contain prayers for and by children.<sup>3</sup> If your church uses the Revised Common Lectionary, there is a lectionary Bible resource designed for child liturgists written by Lyn Zill Briggs.<sup>4</sup> Many of the churches I have been observing have invited children to read the first lectionary reading each week as a way of consistently inviting children to be liturgists. Most of these churches also incorporate some form of preparation for this task, whether it is a class or simply an adult coaching them on their reading and delivery of the passage before the service begins. With this type of consistency children will grow into this role and feel more confident as worship leaders.

Just as the spoken word in worship is important to consider when making worship accessible to all, the words sung are also important to consider. Hymns that have fewer verses with simpler words or have a refrain or chorus that repeats throughout are especially welcome to children. If possible, having a song that is upbeat and could be accompanied by rhythm instruments or movement would also be welcome.

Carolyn Brown, who devoted her life to helping pastors and worship committees plan worship that was accessible to children, wrote many blog posts regarding parts of worship that could be explained to the whole community and by extension the children in the room. One such post addressed the parts of worship, some sung and some spoken, that may be repeated in our liturgies, like the Lord's Prayer, the Doxology, or the Gloria Patri. She offered different ways that the words could be explained, as well as ways to talk about the position these items appear within the liturgy—why they are there and their importance. Many adults are unfamiliar with this information, and so addressing them within worship also allows parents and guardians to feel more confident in answering the questions of their children around different parts of worship.<sup>5</sup>

Most of our services are word heavy, but using words is not always how children, particularly young children, express themselves. Some churches

experiment with interactive prayer stations where all members can express prayers that go beyond words through some physical action. One of the leading proponents of such prayer centers is Rev. Theresa Cho. Her website offers many examples of these stations throughout the Christian yearly cycle.<sup>6</sup>

One of the main barriers to intergenerational worship has often been the sermon. Many of the children I have talked with have claimed that this is their least favorite part of worship and the most difficult to understand given the complexity of the language and concepts being used. David Csinos, a preaching professor and child advocate who teaches at Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, Nova Scotia, has written a wonderful book addressing this issue titled *A Gospel for All Ages: Teaching and Preaching with the Whole Church*.<sup>7</sup> He worked with pastors and educators from around the world to offer different models of collaboration of all ages in the preparation and delivery of the sermon.

Beyond the actual experience of worshipping together across generations, intergenerational worship can also happen in preparing for the Sunday service, whether that is some group engagement around the Scripture that will be preached or the creation of a visual art form that will be an integral part of the coming service. There are many ways to engage all ages in being active participants in the creation of worship that will enhance their experience on Sunday morning. In this next section we'll hear from educators, parents, and children that participated in research our planning team has done over the last few years thanks to the generosity of the Lilly Endowment initiative on Nurturing Children Through Worship and Prayer.

## What We Are Hearing from Churches and Children

In the summer of 2022, Columbia Theological Seminary, where I serve on the faculty, was invited to submit a proposal in a new initiative started by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. to enhance the worship and prayer lives of children. We call our project Wonder of Worship (WoW) and are just about to begin our second year of this grant. In preparing our application we conducted six online focus groups with church pastors, educators, parents, and volunteers around the United States. One group also included international participants with ties to Nigeria.

In these series of conversations we asked them to tell stories of their experiences in children's ministry

and how the worship experience in particular had changed for children and families in the last five years, which included the pandemic. Many of these people talked about the experiments they tried during the pandemic with engaging children online and in outdoor settings. The latter were especially popular with families, as the services tended to be less formal and more tolerant of children's movements and enthusiasm. At least one church I visited has maintained their outdoor services weekly along with their sanctuary services for some of those reasons. It was delightful to see multiple generations worshipping together in an environment where all ages were engaged, and children were free to roam as they wished.

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Another thing we learned from the focus groups was that in some churches the families that returned after the pandemic were different from those who had attended the church prior to this marker event. Apparently, the pandemic isolation allowed some families an opportunity to reassess their values and make some different decisions about where and when they would attend worship services.

We also heard a variety of responses about when people thought children should sit through a whole worship service. Some indicated that their preference would be at birth. Others indicated an age where children could read the liturgies and hymns and so more fully participate. Our Nigerian siblings talked about their congregations waiting until youth turned eighteen before they joined the adult service. In their earlier years they had a separate worship service that allowed children and youth to take on different worship leadership roles, so that when they entered the adult service, they were already prepared to be a liturgist, usher, choir member, and so forth.

Finally, there was a deep desire for anything that was given to children during the worship service to engage them more fully in worship rather than

simply to entertain them. Some of these churches have worship bags for children to use in the pew, while others rely on a particular area within the worship space that has activities for children to explore during worship. These spaces are often termed "pray grounds."

After hearing from these adults, we wanted to make sure that we also heard from the children (ages seven to twelve) themselves. So as we built our proposal for the implementation phase of the grant, we built in a child research component, where during my sabbatical I would meet with children in different churches within the United States to hear their views on worship and to ascertain what they knew about how worship works in their local congregation.

At the time of this writing, I have visited five churches in Florida, Pennsylvania, and Ohio with plans to spend time with children in California and Texas in the near future. This research was conducted over an hour to ninety minutes and consisted of various activities that the children participated in, as well as a short survey that was filled out by parents or guardians on the same day.

The activities with the children began with four questions printed on large sheets of newsprint to which the children could respond in words or pictures. These questions were (1) What do you like most about worship? (2) What do you like least about worship? (3) Who leads worship? and (4) How do you participate in worship? So far, the things they like the most are things that they actively participate in such as communion, singing, prayer, and activities from the bag or pray ground space that they do during worship. The least enjoyed parts of worship are where they have to sit still and listen, like the sermon. Consistently the children only named the pastors and perhaps the educator as leaders of worship. They never named the choir director, ushers, or themselves if they often served as liturgists or ushers. Most also neglected these roles when mentioning how they participate. The most frequent answer to this question was to sit still, listen, and be quiet.

After these four questions were asked and answered, usually the next activity was to ask the children to take me on a tour of their church, showing me where they most connect with God on the church property. We went up and down many stairs. Sometimes they would take me to the sanctuary, but often they would take me outside or

to the threshold where they entered the church. One young girl took me to a room where a church that had merged with her local congregation kept their archives, because her grandfather was the last pastor of this church and she would sometimes have lunch with the remaining remnant of members, who attended her current local church.

The children then did other activities like identifying pictures of objects and people connected with their local church, placing strips of their typical order of service in the order they thought they occurred, and making hymn markers to use to prepare for worship. These activities generated other information to contemplate about children's knowledge and engagement with worship. Their knowledge is yet to be mined for other insights into children's views of worship in their local church.

## Welcoming Julia, Welcoming All

As an outgrowth of our research, Rachel Pedersen, one of our planning team members, has developed an audit, or inventory, for churches to use in assessing areas of growth to work on in creating more hospitable space for children and families.<sup>8</sup> The churches that Julia and her family visited in our opening vignette could benefit from assessment of how they welcome others.

Some suggestions that might emerge from an audit and that would welcome Julia and her family, among others, are clear signage or written information for new families about where places like the nursery and bathrooms are located. Ushers and greeters could receive training in how to communicate this information to families. Cards in the pews or seat backs could give families information about the theology of all-ages worship that the congregation practices. Perhaps there would be welcoming items for child engagement (worship bags, children's bookshelf, or stuffed animal companions) where people enter the worship space. This would indicate that children are welcome to stay in worship with their families or perhaps go to a space within the sanctuary during worship.

During the worship at least one hymn or spiritual song with simple words and/or a repetitive refrain could be chosen. Attention could be given to language usage in any spoken liturgies or responses, and worship planners could incorporate other visual symbols or interactive stations that engage the attention of those who use other modalities to connect with God. Children could have visible

leadership roles as ushers, liturgists, choir members, acolytes, and communion helpers. During the sermon the pastor could pause for congregational participation or give an illustration that children could relate to and understand.

These are just some of the many ways that space can become more hospitable for families and by extension for all who worship God in different ways. To make these changes in practice takes the collaboration of pastors and worship committees, as well as any designated staff that are specifically oriented towards children's ministry. A final thing we found out from our focus groups was that few of those overseeing children's ministry had any input into worship planning beyond the occasional service like a Christmas pageant or recognition of Sunday school teachers. To make changes would require an ongoing collaboration with all who plan worship and acknowledgement that children are a part of the worshiping community and need to be able to bring their full selves to this time of connecting with God. May the wonder of worship help you connect to God with the curiosity and joy of a Julia in your life!

## Notes

1. Amy Lindeman Allen, *The Gifts They Bring: How Children in the Gospels Can Shape Inclusive Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023).
2. Iona Community, *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, rev. ed. (Iona, Scotland: Wild Goose, 2017), 19–20.
3. Ruth Burgess and Thom Shuman, *My Gran's Porch: Prayers By and For Kids* (Iona, Scotland: Wild Goose, 1988); Marian Wright Edelman, *I'm Your Child, God: Prayers for Our Children* (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2002).
4. Lyn Zill Briggs, *God's Word, My Voice: A Lectionary for Children* (New York: Church Publishing, 2015).
5. Carolyn Brown, "Helping Children Sing, Say, and Pray Along," *Worshiping with Children blog*, October 18, 2012, <https://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2012/10/helping-children-sing-say-and-pray-along.html/>.
6. Theresa Cho, "Still Waters," <https://theresaecho.com/interactive-prayer-stations/>, accessed May 15, 2024.
7. David M. Csinos, *A Gospel for All Ages: Teaching and Preaching with the Whole Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022).
8. If you would like a copy of this inventory, simply write us at [wow@ctsnet.edu](mailto:wow@ctsnet.edu) and we'll be happy to send you a copy free of charge.