

## Children and Worship

We have all heard the quote, "let the children come unto me" (Luke 8:16) countless times. The question is what are we doing to help children actually "come" to Him?

Many churches have wonderful Christian Education programs where children learn about God through Sunday School, Bible Study or weekday programs. Most churches have a confirmation class where children not only learn more about God, but are encouraged to deepen their relationship with Him or to make a decision for Him personally. But what about worship? Worship - both corporately and privately - is not only a tool for spiritual formation, but is a means of grace by which we deepen our relationship with God and commune with His Spirit in an intimate way.



Typically larger churches have a "children's church" program that helps to fill the need for corporate worship among kids; we have one at our church. But what about smaller congregations? Many of them don't have the resources to pull off that kind of ministry.

Fortunately there are things that every church can do to incorporate children into worship. But first we must shift the paradigm of children's traditional role *in* worship. I once had a children's church teacher tell me that she felt her job as a teacher was to "teach kids to be still and listen" so that they would be "ready to sit in the big church service." Now she was a dedicated teacher and she was very sincere. But she was sincerely wrong. If we teach kids that their role is to "be still and listen" then what we end up with are adults who don't know how to do anything but "be still and listen." And how many stewardship campaigns does it take to undo that mentality?

Children need to be taught to worship. And since children learn by doing, we need to include them in the service. At our church, children begin to acolyte when they are big enough to carry a candle lighter; usually 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. But our acolytes do more than light candles. They help the pastor serve communion, assist with baptisms and confirmation and any other tasks that the pastor may need help with in the service. We also utilize children as junior ushers and greeters.

Another thing to think about is how "kid friendly" your service may or may not be. How do we engage children with the message? Is it over their head? Typically it is. So consider a children's time, or children's message that is on their level, Take the main point from the week's message and break it down for them. I utilize object lessons, easy magic tricks, and comedy to relate the message to kids. And the interesting thing is, I have tons of adults come up and tell me they get more out of children's time than they do out of the "grown-up" message.

How about singing songs periodically that appeal to younger people? What about handing out children's activity pages with word hunts or crosswords that go along with the message? There are all kinds of ways to engage children in the church service. You don't even have to be that creative.

I like to visit other churches periodically and "borrow" ideas. One of the best ideas I found was at another church in our district. They had worship tote bags (as many churches do). But inside they had a children's bulletin, a children's early reader Bible, activity pages, and a handbook that explained the different elements in the service. It taught about the various parts of worship and explained the purpose of different items in the sanctuary. The kids could read it and learn what the altar is for, why we change the paraments, what the liturgical colors mean, and why we say the Apostle's creed. It was one of the coolest teaching tools I had seen. So I "borrowed" it. Modified it for our needs and now we use it!

Including children in worship isn't difficult, but it is vital. It isn't rocket science, but it does take a shift in priorities and some commitment. It doesn't take a lot of imagination, but it does take some thought. And ANY church can do it.

-Richard Booker, Children's Minister - Bellemont UMC, Burlington, NC