



## Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

### How do we involve children in worship?

*The worship staff receives a number of similar inquires on worship-related topics from across the church.*

*These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.*

*The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.*

Involving children in worship requires at least two steps. First is the understanding of children's unique needs and gifts and how these are present in the worshipping assembly. Second is being attuned to this understanding in the nuts and bolts aspects of worship planning.

#### **Background**

In most congregations, gone are the days when children are "seen but not heard" during worship. To the contrary, congregations value children and want this to be communicated in their worship. Some try to incorporate children's sermons or children's music and while this is well-meaning, these additions alone can miss the mark. What can be communicated, often unintentionally, is that this moment of worship is for children; the rest of worship is for adults.

A more helpful approach is to consider how children can be involved throughout the liturgy. To do this, we need to consider the unique gifts and needs of children.

#### *Stages of Development*

It is important for worship leaders and planners to have at least a basic sense of child development. This can be as simple as understanding that a two year old is not the same as a five year old; a five year old is not the same as an eleven year old. As children grow, their capacity for language develops, as well as their ability to sit still for longer periods. Sunday school curriculum writers understand this, choosing to teach in a way that reaches the ages intended.

The challenge for worship, of course, is to include children even when much of worship will be above their developmental level. When a family of many ages gathers for a family meal, they will be challenged by the needs of aging grandparents and squirmy toddlers. Yet the value of gathering the whole family together outweighs the challenges. This is true at the gathering of God's people as well. While some congregations may, on occasion, hold specific worship opportunities for children only, the whole congregation benefits from having children regularly among them.

### *Engaging the Senses*

Children will especially respond to a worshipping environment that is multi-sensory. (see also, [“How does worship involve all our senses?”](#)). Even though young children may not grasp many of the words of worship, they will take in all the sights, sounds and actions. Assemblies can encourage children’s participation (and adults as well!) by including all of the senses and paying attention to the non-verbal dimensions of worship. Such awareness of the many senses used in worship is also helpful for welcoming the developmentally disabled (see also, [“How can our worship services be more welcoming to people with disabilities?”](#))

Exchanging the peace (see also, [“What is the Exchange of Peace?”](#)) and making the sign of the cross (see also, [“Why do Lutherans make the sign of the cross?”](#)) are only two of many ritual actions in worship that can have meaning for children. Children don’t need to assign words to actions before they can find meaning in them. Children will understand body language or actions of the worship leaders and the assembly much faster than they will understand the words that are spoken. They will, in turn, use these actions to discover the meaning of the words accompanying the action. Some congregations commune young children, understanding baptism as the entry point to communion (see also, [“At what age do congregation members receive communion?”](#)) Encouraging non-verbal dimensions of worship such as these can contribute greatly to children’s full participation in worship. (See below under “practice” for further suggestions)

### *Value of Repetition and Ritual*

Children are creatures of habit. Repetition, whether it is a nighttime routine or the reading of a favorite story, provides order and security in children’s lives. Such routines enable them to bring meaning, understanding and maturity to their experiences. This translates to the worship experience. Just when adults may feel that something is “rote” or too familiar, children may just be grasping it. It is helpful to keep children in mind when considering how often to change a musical setting, for example. Worship planners are wise to seek a balance between newness and familiarity for children as well as for adults.

### *Theology of Welcome*

When addressing the topic of children in worship, it is helpful to recall Jesus’ welcome of children. Many of us are familiar with the often quoted, “let the children come unto me” (Matthew 19:14). Yet we might forget how radical such a welcome was in Jesus’ time. Children were outsiders, afforded little value in society. In many respects, the twenty-first century welcomes children, but this is certainly not universal. Christians—in worship and in all dimensions of their life together—have the gift and charge to welcome children paired with Jesus’ challenge: “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). What can children teach us about worship?

### **Practice**

Another biblical quotation about children is the “a little child shall lead them” in Isaiah’s vision of the peaceful kingdom (Isaiah 11:6). When considering the practical aspects of children in worship, it is wise to ask how children can lead.

Children’s choirs: Beyond singing an anthem, children can lead verses of a psalm, sing a stanza of a hymn, or sing the leader parts to parts of the liturgy such as the Kyrie. In fact, children can sometimes be the most effective teacher of new music.

When children teach a new hymn, for example, the assembly will often join them, encouraged by their ability. (see also, [“How do we introduce new music to our congregation?”](#))

Sunday school: Christian education can be integrated with worship in many ways. In place of or in addition to a children’s choir, Sunday school children can also be musical leaders. Children can make visual arts that can be part of the worship space or used in a procession.

Readers: Children with the gift of reading aloud can regularly serve as lay readers. Some readings have natural dramatic elements that could be read by more than one person.

Visual Arts: Children can provide “behind the scenes” leadership for worship by helping with visual arts. When congregations are considering this dimension of worship, children can be invited to participate. For more on the visual arts in worship, see [“What are some resources on art and materials used in worship?”](#).

Movement: Whenever there is movement in worship such as processions, this is a natural place to include children as participants and leaders. (see also, [“How do we use the body in worship?”](#))

Many of the ways that lay people participate in worship can include children: ushering, greeting, helping with altar guild, and more (see also, [“How can lay people participate in worship leadership”](#)). Having a family serve as ushers or greeters, for example, involves both adults and children.

#### *Extra Preparation*

Children will normally need more preparation when taking on a leadership role. This takes time, of course, but the time is well spent. Oftentimes the attention children give to the task can be instructive for all of us, a reminder that careful preparation enriches worship for all ages.

Involving children more fully will also involve thoughtful planning and collaboration on the part of worship leaders such as pastors, church musicians, Christian educators and worship and music committees/teams. Yet the result of having children more engaged in worship is worth the time spent in visioning and planning.

Children who participate actively and are entrusted with leadership will sense that all are welcome to worship and that they are valued for their presence and gifts. Children can participate fully in worship. In addition to what is mentioned above, below is a list of possibilities. With creative planning and visioning, congregations will certainly add more to this list

- Invite children to design the art for worship bulletins
- Involve children in entrance processions as acolytes, choir members, playing simple instruments such as bells, maracas or tambourines.
- Broaden the roles of a children’s choir to include leadership on psalms, hymns and other service music in addition to children’s anthems.

- Add simple movements to songs in worship. This especially engages younger children.
- Consider children for when planning for the seasons of the church year: What can children do during the Easter Vigil, Good Friday, Pentecost Sunday, etc? For example, at the Easter Vigil, encourage children to bring bells to ring during the Hymn of Praise, following baptisms and at other times. In the Sundays after Epiphany, children can make alleluia banners to be “buried” as part of the sending rite on Transfiguration (see also, [“Why don’t we use alleluias during Lent?”](#)). They can be taken out and hung or carried during Easter Vigil or on Easter Day.
- Involve children in Baptismal celebrations: Singing or playing instruments during an acclamation, filling the font with water, and more.
- Consider expanding communion preparation to include children and adults. For guidance, see the Fed and Forgiven materials.
- Become a member of the [Choristers Guild](#). This organization provides many resources for choir directors and others interested in involving children more fully in worship.
- Include children when bringing the money gifts and communion elements to the table. Food for a local food bank or blankets for Lutheran world relief are just two examples of non-monetary gifts that could be brought forward.

## RESOURCES

### [Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ☞ At what age do congregation members receive communion?
- ☞ Do we celebrate Youth Sunday?
- ☞ How can lay people participate in worship leadership?
- ☞ How can our worship services be more welcoming to people with disabilities?
- ☞ How do we use the body in worship?
- ☞ How do we introduce new music to our congregation?
- ☞ How does worship involve all our senses?
- ☞ What are some resources on art and materials used in worship?
- ☞ What is the Exchange of Peace?
- ☞ Why do Lutherans make the sign of the cross?
- ☞ Why don’t we use alleluias during Lent?

### [Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Sundays and Seasons*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. Print version published annually by church year.  
 📖 Also available as an online subscription at [www.sundaysandseasons.com](http://www.sundaysandseasons.com).
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne; Julie O'Brien; Melinda Quivik and Martin Seltz, eds., *Leading Worship Matters: A Sourcebook for Preparing Worship Leaders*. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.

- 📖 *Fed and Forgiven*. (multi-media options )Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 Comer, Marilyn. *Life songs, Leader Book*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999.
- 📖 Sandell, Elizabeth J., *Including Children in Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991.

### Other Resources

- 📖 [Godly Play](#) – this approach teaches classical Christian language in a way that enhances the child’s authentic experience of God so it can contribute to the creative life of the child and the world.
- 📖 Baxter, Andrea. “The Integrative Approach to Children in Worship” *Cross Accent: Journal of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians* Vol. 20, No.1 (March 2012): 19-25.
- 📖 Bernstein, Eleanor, and John Leonard, eds. [Children in the Assembly of the Church](#). Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992.
- 📖 Cavalletti, Sofia. [The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children](#). Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992.)
- 📖 Nye, Rebecca. [Children’s Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters](#). London, England: Church House Publishing, 2009.
- 📖 Rotermund, Donald, ed. [Children Sing His Praise](#). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985.
- 📖 Stewart, Sonya and Jerome W. Berryman. [Young Children and Worship](#). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1988.
- 📖 Witviliet, John, ed. [A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship: A Sourcebook for Christian Educators, Musicians and Clergy](#). Garland, Tx: Choristers Guild, 1999.
- 📖 Choristers Guild: [www.choristersguild.org/](http://www.choristersguild.org/)

*Revised January 2013*

**Copyright © 2013 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. [www.elca.org/worshipfaq](http://www.elca.org/worshipfaq).**

*This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.*