

Worship Readiness: Preparing Children for Congregational Worship

by Virginia C. Thomas

The following suggestions are offered to parents whose children will soon be included in the worship of the total church family. In most Presbyterian churches this is around the age of six or the year a child enters first grade.

The transition from the individual, unstructured experiences of extended sessions and nursery care to the planned worship of the church is a logical one at this time. The child's world is broadening. He/she is capable of experiencing and enjoying a wider community. Early elementary children want to belong.

First graders are also acquiring skills that can be used in worship. Reading, listening, following instructions, counting, singing — all part of first grade curriculum — are involved in our acts of worship. First graders love the challenge of developing and using these skills.

While the transition from kindergarten to congregation may be logical, it is usually abrupt. There is little preparation for parents or children to help them in this important step. The church does not plan for this development and it usually catches parents by surprise.

Yet there is a 'worship readiness' as truly as there is a 'reading readiness.' The call to worship and the capacity for worship are clearly God's gifts to us. We do not control these. But we can cultivate the ability to hear and respond what has been given to adults and children.

These suggestions offer some ways of developing worship readiness. Not all of them will be helpful to any one family. They could be used selectively several months before first grade, during first and second grade, or as family routines throughout elementary years.

Prepare Children for Worship by Worshiping at Home

Don't wait for angel's choirs, soft lights, technicolor splendor, tranquility, or even a reverent attitude. Naturally, frequently, and honestly:

1. Recognize God's love and providence in the daily events of your lives. Giving thanks and expressing enthusiasm are the way worship begins for young children. Anything we enjoy—from a meal to a good TV program—can be an occasion for recognizing God.
2. Reflect on the gifts we receive and the experiences we have. Take time to verbalize what we think God is doing, the questions we have, and our awareness of God's presence.
3. Remember what God has done. Remember his mighty acts of redemption as we find them in the Bible. (But don't begin with Genesis and plow through.) Remember what God has done in your own life and family. Birthdays, anniversaries, the end of the school year or of summer, the New Year, or graduation are natural times to think about what God has done and is doing.
4. Respond to God's love with specific decisions and actions. Let children in on the way you decide to spend your money and your time. Let your forgiveness of children and spouse demonstrate what God's forgiveness means to you.

Children are most ready for worship when those they love and trust have demonstrated they value the experience.

Introduce Your Child to the Place of Worship

1. Visit the sanctuary when it is empty. Walk around. Look. Point out symbols, windows, colors, or anything that visually helps us think about God.
2. Examine and talk about: the pulpit and Bible, the organ, the choir loft, the communion table, the baptismal font.

3. Choose a place to sit. Try out several seats—the pastor’s, the choir’s, the front row, the back row. Let your child choose the place that suits him/her best. Is the seat comfortable? Would a cushion or footstool help? (A relatively light-weight, noiseless one can be made from milk cartons.) Is there enough space to move? To tuck dangling legs? Reserve this seat for your first official Sunday in church.

4. Handle everything in the pew rack and explain the purpose. Practice getting out a hymn book, signing your name on a fellowship card, opening a Bible. Explain communion cup holders if they are fastened to the pew.

A visit to the sanctuary can establish it in a child’s mind as a place of purpose where important things happen, a welcoming place where we have things to contribute. Don’t worry about limiting God to one place. We are not likely to meet God in every place if we do not meet Him in one particular place.

Introduce Your Child to the Leaders of Worship

Children respond to people they know. Did your child meet his/her first grade teacher in advance? It’s as reasonable to make contact with ministers and worship leaders before they lead your child in worship.

1. Visit the minister in his/her study (and invite him/her to your home.) Let your child see the books and catch a glimpse of the work involved in preparing to preach God’s word. No deep theological discussion is required. Five minutes or less is adequate time. The visit will be as beneficial to the minister as it is to your child.

2. Visit anyone who provides leadership in music —choir director, organist, choir member, liturgist. Talk about what they do, when they practice, why they are a part of worship.

3. Introduce your child to members of the worship committee and ushers. They need this more than your child does.

Make Friends with Fellow Worshipers

Introduce your child to people he/she will encounter in church. Your child needs to recognize members of his/her church family when he/she comes into the sanctuary. Call on an older couple who may sit near you. (They may be more tolerant of rattling papers and audible questions during the service.) Spend an evening with a family whose children are the same age. Cultivate the sense of community outside the sanctuary.

Introduce Your Child to the Hymnal

1. Buy (borrow or steal if you must) a hymnbook for your home. It is a possession as necessary and reasonable as the daily newspaper or weekly magazine.

2. Use the hymnal at home. Read a hymn, or part of one, as a blessing or family prayer. Use it for your own devotional reading. Next to the Bible it is our richest resource for grasping and being grasped by the Christian faith. [Look up the over 80 “Children’s Hymns” listed on pp. 691-692]

3. Sing. In church and at home. A joyful noise is very acceptable. Sing off-key, on-key, in the car, in the kitchen, at the table. “For the Beauty of the Earth” has the ring of truth when sung as you see a sunset or on a picnic.

4. Listen to records and tapes of great hymns of the church. Try your church library (or offer some direction to their acquisitions) and check the teaching resources of the church.

5. Make a tape of hymns your church sings or that you know will be sung in the coming months. Seasonal hymns are fairly predictable. Ask the choir or a choir member to tape these hymns for you.

6. Encourage your church to choose hymns with children in mind. A hymn-of-the-month, repeated 4 times, helps children learn a new hymn with adults. (By the 4th Sunday they are usually more comfortable with the new song than their parents.) Select hymns with repeated phrases and refrains — like “Holy, Holy, Holy.” Any hymn with repeated ‘alleluias’ is a great bridge to singing.
7. Call the church and get hymns for Sunday in advance. Read them over or sing them at home. Be sure beginning piano students have a simple book of hymns to play. Let them accompany whenever possible.
8. Become familiar with your hymnbook arrangement — responsive readings, prayers, creeds, hymns. In The Hymnal, with hymns grouped by subject, locate all the Christmas carols.
9. Make friends with composers and authors of hymns. The situations that caused them to express their faith in hymns add meaning to the experience of singing. They Sang a New Song (MacKay) is one source of hymn stories to be shared with children. As children grow older they enjoy subtracting dates to see how long the hymn has been sung.
10. Put your first grader’s skills with numbers to work. He/she can count. Use this ability to locate hymns. (Help when page numbers and hymn numbers are different.) Count the number of stanzas.
11. Practice reading a hymn stanza through. “Come, Christians, Join to Sing” is a good one because of the repeated phrase. The shape of ‘alleluia’ is unusual to a beginning reader, and consequently easy to remember. The pattern of reading is different because words are printed to match music. The eye does not move to the next printed line, but to the print under the next staff of music. Cover the page with clear plastic and underline the first stanza in red, the next in blue.
12. Buy a package of colored file cards. Hold them under each line as you read it through. Four lines of print and two music staves make a busy reading area for a beginner. Always take file cards to church to use in following hymns in worship and to mark hymns and responses that will be used. Keep an extra pack in the pocket of the car. (Some enlightened churches provide these and thus increase the child’s sense of welcome, belonging, and participation.)
13. Few beginning readers can read hymns through. But all first graders can recognize some words. Let them find as many ‘ands’ as possible. If they can learn to read ‘dog’ they can certainly learn to read ‘God.’

(The fringe benefits to vocabulary building, line scanning, awareness of syllables, and inflection are so great that this would all be beneficial educationally apart from training in worship. Children with learning disabilities need special care here, but even they increase in self-confidence by using skills they do have.)

Introduce Your Child to the Responses of Worship

The Doxology, the Gloria, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer are common in almost any Christian Church. When your child knows these, he/she can participate in some part of most worship services.

1. Talk about the Apostles’ Creed (or the statement of faith your child will encounter most frequently in your service). Explain what a creed is and why it is part of worship. (A creed helps us remember what God has done for us; it is a way of sharing our faith with each other and making our family stronger; it helps us know the kind of family we are; it is a way of offering ourselves to God. These are some explanations, but you need to think through your own.)
2. Make the creed visible. Print the words on a poster, with space between each major idea. One enterprising family lettered place-mats and covered them with clear plastic.

3. Break the creed up into eight basic statements. Omit the long parenthesis about Jesus for now. Print each statement on one card. Precede each major idea with "I Believe." A child can read this when an adult reads the rest of the statement.
4. Read one statement a day and talk about what it means — as arduous and creative an activity as composing a sonnet or symphony. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know."
5. Make a game of arranging the statements in order.
6. Block out words with markers or colored tape as they are learned. Eventually the card will be covered with tape.
7. Use the same method to learn the long statement about Jesus. It will divide into manageable phrases.

Before you have done all of these things, most children will join in much of the creed by hearing it through several Sundays and saying what they can.

A word about memorizing. It can be a happy experience when: it is a shared experience; it is not pure rote; children can demonstrate reading or writing skills; it is made a game; perfection is not demanded; what is being memorized is important and is used.

Almost anything can be memorized by breaking it into phrases; using pictures as substitutes for words; blocking out one or two key words at a time.

8. Locate the Doxology in the hymnbook. 'Blessings,' 'creatures,' and 'heavenly hosts' may all be pictures if you print the Doxology on a sheet of paper. Children recognize 'praise' if the phrases are placed in 4 lines. But most children learn the Doxology so quickly that no special effort is needed.
9. Use the Doxology as a blessing several times a week, or sing it on a happy occasion.
10. Locate the Lord's Prayer in the Bible (Luke 11) and talk about its origin.
11. If it is in your hymnbook, locate it there.
12. Discuss, break into phrases, illustrate and arrange the phrases in order. Block out words as they are discussed and understood.
13. Pray the Lord's Prayer at bedtime or in the morning.
14. Locate the Gloria in the hymnbook. Note the two 'Amens.' Listen to another version of both the Doxology and the Gloria in Avery and Marsh's *Hymns Hot and Carols Cool*. Listen to the traditional versions on a record and sing along.

Introduce Your Child to the Order of Worship

Bulletins should be X-rated. They are adult reading material.. They are presented in small print, usually crowded. The vocabulary is difficult. Worst of all to a child, worship is presented as a noun. It is something that happens rather than something we do. But you must work with what you have.

1. Buy a package of fine line magic markers. Present them to your child as an aid to worship.
2. Ask the church to mail you a bulletin in advance for several months if this is practical. If not, use last Sunday's bulletin.
3. Number the events in your order of worship. There are usually about 20.
4. Find things that are alike. Use a green marker to underline all the times we pray; times when we sing; times when we listen to music; times when we listen to God's word; etc. (Use a different color for each category.) Don't do this all at once. Spread this activity over several months.

5. Check announcements that pertain to your family.
6. Don't worry about reading this. Your immediate aim is to turn the bulletin into a kind of action chart with colors. The vocabulary may be foreign, but the experiences are not.
7. Let your child number worship events in church and check off each one during the service.

A parenthesis about pencils and drawing in church: Elementary children are capable of doing two things at once. Folding a fleet of paper airplanes and hearing a sermon can occur simultaneously. Sailing the airplane, of course, is a different matter.

Instead of being a distraction, hand activity can help a child concentrate. Pencil and cards can be very practical aids in worship participation. Children can number the order of worship, check off each act and prepare for the next, print words from the bulletin you have underlined. There is an age when children no longer do this profitably. And you, naturally, will have to set limits. No notes or tic-tac-toe.

Anticipate Events in the Service with Your Child

1. Sacraments require special preparation. Calling on a baby before baptism, or sending a card after, adds meaning to the occasion.
2. Special days in the church year bring changes in color and festive music.
3. Ordination, dedication of teachers, stewardship Sunday will all have meaning if they are discussed in advance.

Find Ways to Help Your Child Contribute to Worship

1. Give out bulletins or greet worshipers as a family.
2. Write a prayer of confession, assurance of pardon, or call to worship to be used in prayer. Contribute to the Prayers of the People.
3. Help prepare the sanctuary—distribute envelopes, sharpen pencils, stuff bulletin inserts, arrange flowers, make a banner.
4. Support a youth choir program that encourages worship leadership and not performance.
5. Be sure your child always has a bulletin, a hymnbook, and offering. Be sure your child places his/her gift in the offering plate. Never pass on offering plate over a child's head.

Prepare Your Child Physically and Emotionally for Worship

1. Get a good night's sleep and don't rush on Sunday morning. Better uncombed hair than a harried spirit.
2. Between church school and church be sure your child has a snack, a drink, and a chance to go to the bathroom.
3. Dress comfortably. Forget stiff outfits, ties, new shoes that rub blisters, purses and gloves that get lost.
4. Use the time after you take your seats and during the Prelude to locate hymns and responses; look around and recognize friends, mark on the bulletin the things in the bulletin that you will be doing this week.
5. Now say, "I need to be quiet and talk with God and so do you. Ask God to help the minister and the choir. Ask God to help us worship."

Help Your Child by Your Participation and Attitude

- 1 Never say, “Be quiet, be good, be still”
2. Emphasize by words and actions the positive, important, happy thing you have come to do together.
3. Hug your child frequently during the service. Tell him/her how happy you are to have him/her there. Let your child lean against you, have physical contact, ask you questions, have your attention.
4. Mark the beginning of regular church attendance in some festive way—a special meal, a gift, an outing.
5. For the next several years you will be worshiping through your ministry to your own child. As you answer questions, guide young eyes across a page, locate a scripture, or point out a place in the bulletin, do not mistakenly feel you have interrupted your worship. Remember the One whom we worship said, “Whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this, welcomes me.”

Talk about What Happened after the Service

1. Roast minister for lunch and barbecued baritone promote a critical attitude in children as well as adults.
2. Make honest, positive comments about what worship meant to you. Decide what changes should be made in your life as a result of the service.
3. Listen to your child’s comments about the service. He/she may have a helpful suggestion and an enlightening viewpoint. What they verbalize they remember and come to understand.

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