

Children in worship

By [Theresa Cho](#)

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In the first issue of [PLGRM](#), Rev. LeAnn Watkins, rector at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in St. Paul, MN, shares how after numerous attempts of increasing attendance of bible studies and other church-related programs, her staff decided to cancel it all – everything during the weekdays except seasonal services. You can hear her tell her story on the [Episcopal Story Project](#). She says, “You can't chase after folks and expect them to hear you. You have to be in front of them when they are coming toward you. So we've tried to ask the question, ‘How do we stop chasing people, and get in front of people?’” I have to say that I ask myself the same question.

Not unlike many churches, I can no longer assume that those sitting in the pews are familiar with Bible stories such as Noah and the Ark, Jonah and the Whale, the Prodigal Son, or the Feeding of the 5000 – stories that I have heard growing up as a child. I am also keenly aware that 1-hour of Sunday School is not enough for kids to build a solid foundation for their spiritual formation. Yet, parents often times feel ill-prepared to be the ones to teach their kids the Bible, relying and hoping that the church will do it. The challenge is addressing this issue. I find it almost impossible to find a time where families can meet for a family Bible study. I am often competing with hectic schedules of school activities, games, and family events – not to mention my own. I have thought about creating another worship service that is more family-friendly, but again I am challenged with finding the right day and time.

So, how do I stop chasing people and get in front of them? I decided to focus and change the one thing I knew people showed up – our main worship service. If this is the only guaranteed time where kids, families, singles, young, old, retired, busy, college-age, cradle-Presbyterians, new-to-the-faith, were going to be in one place . . . then I was going to take advantage of it. This meant that worship had to be more intergenerational – more inclusive of all ages, all abilities, and all customs. Intergenerational does not mean kid-friendly. However, it does mean making room for those who are introverted/extroverted, cerebral/tactile, able/less-abled, and

young/old to enter into worship as they feel comfortable. Whether one is an adult or a child, we all have those qualities about us. By focusing on those qualities and not on age, worship can be a wonderful experience for all.

Creating a more intergenerational worship service also challenged me to examine why and how we did things at my church. Why do we have children's sermons in worship? How effective is Sunday School? What is my role as pastor in worship? This last question is the one that really got me thinking. Recently, the form of government in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. started referring to pastors as teaching elders. At first, I did not relate to this new title at all. But if "teaching" is a part of my title then maybe it should be a part of my pastoral identity and character in worship. How would worship be different if I approached worship like a classroom, where together we will learn, experience, and practice our faith. What if worship was a Bible study, mission field, fellowship, and worship service all in one? The music director and I decided to experiment for two months and try it out.

While I have no details to share yet, I can tell you some immediate changes we made.

- No more children's sermons. Gone! Good-bye! Poof! Because kids should be able to participate in worship with their family, there is no need for a children's sermon. Prayers, music, and scripture will be designed in a way for parents to sit with their children in worship so that they can teach them and the kids can observe those around them on how to worship.
- No more Sunday School – well . . . kind of. Normally, Sunday school happens during worship. And while we will still provide Sunday School for preschoolers, those in grades Kindergarten through fifth grade will have ample opportunities to participate and be engaged in worship. Only during the sermon time will they be separated from the adults for an age-appropriate lesson. The motivation behind this is that once they enter middle school, I lose them. They are too busy with school and sport activities. If I only get them from Kindergarten through fifth grade then I want to make sure that they have a positive, educational, and meaningful worship experience.
- No more pews and when I say pews, I mean 100 year old heavy obstructions that are impossible to move. We are in the beginning stages of replacing them with stackable pews that will give us the flexibility to move them and will match the historic beauty of the sanctuary.

- Bring in the projection screen. One of the challenges we face with our 100 year old sanctuary is finding projection screens that marry with the decor. We will be working with an architect to design screens that not only match the space but also function.
- Provide more interactive opportunities in worship. While my church already does interactive prayer stations, there are many other ways to involve those in worship through music, prayer, and word. These next two months we will be experimenting with different ways to that.

These are some of the changes that having children in worship has given us the opportunity to do. It's more than just tolerating their noises. It's recognizing that whether we are children or adults, we all have different needs and comforts in worship that need attending to. How is then worship inclusive and exclusive? What in worship is meaningful and mundane? How are you breathing new life in worship?

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