

Worshipping and Celebrating the Liturgical Seasons with Children and Adolescents

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Worship, the ritualistic communal gathering in a sacred space to glorify God, is the essential heartbeat of any community of faith. While worship practices and styles may vary wildly from denomination to denomination, from congregation to congregation, and even sometimes within the same individual parish, the intent is the same. Worship is how we engage in and perpetuate the divine initiative of a creator God. Author and artist Gertrud Mueller Nelson explains,

“Through ritual and ceremonies we people in turn make order out of chaos. In endless space, we create a fixed point to orient ourselves: a sacred space. To timelessness we impose rhythmic repetitions: the recurrent feast. And to untamed or unbound matter, we give a shape a name, a meaning.” (Nelson 25)

In worship, we invoke, acknowledge, invite, recognize, celebrate, and praise God. Unfortunately, this opportunity to enter transcendent mystery often becomes the stale, repetitive, and didactic purview of a few select adults – priests, pastors, and perhaps musicians. Members of the congregation, especially young people, are relegated to a passive role if invited to participate at all. Children are often quietly escorted out of the sacred space, shuttled off to a far corner of the facility, to be engaged in schoolroom style learning with a peer group. Families who chose to bring their young children or teens to worship endure disapproving stares, glares, or the pointed reminder, “You know, we do offer childcare during services.”

And yet, the word liturgy, which is defined as a fixed set of ceremonies, words, and actions used in religious worship, comes from the Greek word *leiturgia* meaning public service, or public work. We commonly understand liturgy to be “the work of the people.” In considering faith formation for a new generation, we must expand our current practice of liturgy to be one that truly includes all people, young and old, clergy and lay, those new to the faith and those who have walked a longer path. We must consider new (and sometimes very old!) ways of enlisting every member of the congregation to engage in this sacred work we are all called to do.

As we consider the role of young people specifically, it is also enlightening to consider the purpose of play. Maria Montessori defined play as being the work of the child. It follows, therefore, that if liturgy is the work of the people, and the people include children, that liturgy itself must be transformed to become more childlike and to include a sense of play. This is not to say that worship is to be taken lightly, or that it should be reimaged in any reductive way. Worship can and must remain a profoundly sacred act, and yet it can be energized and enriched with a spirit of childlike playfulness.

In re-invigorating worship to be more childlike, mature adult faith is neither denied or discredited. Susan Bock reminds us that “childlike” is not simplistic or cute, but rather is “...divine and eternal, utterly open to beauty, awe, and love.” By reconstructing liturgy and redefining church to include the

child, we reimagine church to be “...for that tender, brave, soulful part of all of us that we bring from heaven and mostly bury on the way to adulthood.” It is what “Jesus says we adults must turn and go back for if we would lay hold of heaven’s treasures.” (Bock 1)

Consider this well-known passage from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 13: 11-12, NRSV)

Perhaps this passage is not an endorsement of casting aside our childlike ways, but rather a reminder that as we move from the speech, thoughts, and reason of a child, the mirror, in fact, grows dimmer. It is only at such time that we reclaim our childlike wonder that we might finally see and understand God face to face. Worship offers us the opportunity to reclaim some of that wonder.

What We Need to Understand Before We Can Transform Worship

So how might our communal worship be transformed? What are developmentally appropriate strategies to help our children and teens—not to mention adults—grow in faith through their participation in worship and in the celebration of the liturgical seasons? Before we can answer these questions, we must address some fundamental misperceptions and related challenges, and we need to understand the relational needs of children and teens at each stage of development.

Misperception #1: Young children don’t get anything out of worship.

This misperception can be debunked by any priest who has looked out over the congregation and witnessed a two-year-old perfectly mimic the gesture of blessing and elevation of the sacramental elements. Unfortunately, the misperception that children don’t get anything out of worship is one that is used to justify the practice of removing children so that they might engage in more “meaningful” or “beneficial” activities, often in the form of traditional Sunday school-style learning or age-segregated children’s chapel. As we will see below, however, it is not that children are incapable of engaging in worship, but rather their participation is often so constrained as to restrict them from achieving their full potential. Chances are if children aren’t getting anything out of worship, neither are many of the adults sitting in the pews! Strategies designed to enhance and better engage children will benefit the entire congregation as well.

One challenge is walking the fine line between the hospitable and necessary practice of offering childcare during worship; yet not allowing that offering to become the de facto practice. It is essential to talk with families and the congregation at large about how childcare can be used to support parents when they need it, but that it should not preclude any child from being present in worship. Explicitly stressing that worship is of value to children and that participation in worship is always the “first choice” is critical.

Misperception #2: Teens don't want to attend worship.

This misperception can be debunked by anyone who has attended an end-of-session chapel service at camp. With heartfelt music, and bittersweet and profound testimonies of faith and friendship, the passion and engagement of young people in worship cannot be denied. With linked arms, streaming tears, and candlelight, teens clearly find God in community and communion with one another. Worship is powerful, transformative, and unabashedly enjoyed. Our challenge is to transform worship—and indeed our communities—to capture some of the power and passion of a camp service.

One challenge, however, is that we must find ways to construct worship services that appeal to teens that aren't emotionally manipulative. Rather they must derive from deep and abiding connections to one another and to God. Camp can be a "mountain top" experience; weekly worship creates a steady foundation. Worship that evokes emotions without a substantial and sustaining foundation may ultimately be counter-productive—teens may become embarrassed, or uncomfortable with their own strong emotions if they have no way to effectively channel those feelings into authentic formation, growth, and purpose. Furthermore, a sense of connection to worship for teens must never be achieved in any way that promotes secrecy, cliquishness, or unhealthy insularity. While different worship styles may appeal to different people, all worship should be open, invitational, and transparent.

Misperception #3: Adult worship is compromised by the presence of children.

This misperception can be debunked by anyone who has ever been charmed by a toddler fixated on the dancing play of light coming through a stained-glass window, or shared a joyful game of peek-a-boo with a gurgling baby in the next pew, or listened to the wavering voice of a teen lector grow confident in conviction while successfully reading a challenging passage. True, children can be wiggly. They may talk or cry at inappropriate times. Teens may whisper or play on their phones. And yet there is no biblical mandate that all worship must be silent and still. Adults are capable of "misbehaving" in church as well. Furthermore, there are an infinite variety of ways to worship, and rather than generalize a style of worship as being appropriate to any given age, better to simply recognize that all of us may need and respond to different types of worship in different ways on different days. There are days when we seek to be contemplative, meditative, and silent; and there are days when we find God in joyous upbeat music and enthusiastic greetings during the passing of the peace. An agitated toddler might be disruptive in a contemplative Taizé service – or might be soothed by it. A pensive adult might choose to sit sequestered in the balcony for a more meditative experience – or might seek out the physical intimacy of the laying of hands during healing prayer. There are days we look forward to warmly and loudly greeting our brothers and sisters in Christ; there are days when we want to run to the woods for 40 days of silent solitude! Our goal is to create worship experiences that invite participants of all ages to engage in worship and with one another in a way that honors where each is on that particular day on their faith journey.

One challenge is changing long-held and firmly entrenched perceptions about the role of children in worship. Regular statements and postings in bulletins, newsletters, social media, church websites, and other formal communications channels can include consistent statements about welcoming children to all services, suggestions to parishioners on how to engage families with young children, reminders that young children are wiggly or that there may be some joyful noise, and that young children often put the

“active” in the phrase “I’m active in my church.” Photos showing children in church should be readily visible on websites, social media, and church bulletin boards. The message needs to be clearly communicated to everyone who enters the church, newcomer or long-time member, that all people are valued and welcome whether they are wiggly two-year-olds, curious four-year-olds, or defiant thirteen-year-olds and that we are all called to walk together in our faith lives.

Considering the Relational Needs of Children and Teens at Each Stage of Development

As we prepare to transform our worship, we must recognize that just like adults whose life experiences require and respond to different aspects of worship, so too children and teens will bring the unique age-dependent perspectives and abilities to their engagement in worship and with other members of the community and beyond.

Young Children

For the youngest worshippers, whose primary developmental concern is establishing trust and safety, the worship community represents an expanding circle of safety, from relationships with immediate family to widening relationships with their broader church community. As children grown and evolve, it is within this trusting circle that they can begin to test their abilities and limits, always taking a few steps toward independence, but then literally and figuratively scampering back to the safety of parents and other caring adults. As their sense of self-confidence grows in a nurturing community, the stage is set for the child to carry that love and security into the wider world.

Secondly, young children are reassured by repetition and routine such as offered in liturgy – nothing is rote to them; repetitive actions are the way that young children test the world. A child repeatedly dropping a spoon from a high chair is scientifically confirming that gravity works – the hypothesis predicts that every time the spoon is released, it will go down. And it does, confirming the child’s expectation. Similarly watching the same video over and over again, or wanting to be read the same book repeatedly, is merely a child’s way of establishing the order and predictability of the world. This in turn helps them then to determine how then to navigate that world. Repetition, for young children, is reassuring and contributes to their sense of safety and well-being.

Older Children

School-aged children are well on their way towards achieving autonomy and independence in their individual development. For them, determining their individual role as part of a broader worshipping community is important; as is the increasing importance of forming peer relationships within that community. School-aged children are eager to differentiate themselves from younger children—the “babies”—and are infinitely curious about older children and teens. Juxtaposed over all of their relationships, however, is a strong sense of order and justice, and a keen sense of right and wrong. Children in this phase respond also well to procedural tasks, and enjoy the satisfaction of systematically completing them and of exercising their newly developed skills and capabilities. Older children are often confident at this stage, content in their family relationships and eager to please other carrying adults.

They are still playful and passionate, and blissfully unaware of the impending chaos that the next phase of development brings.

Young Adolescents

For young adolescents, the only constant in this phase is that everything is constantly changing! This is a time of incredible transition, including physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, familial, social, and educational shifts. In this tumultuous phase, the consistency of worship, the personal validation from community relationships, and a sense of the unwavering love of God can be an essential anchor. Young adolescents engage parents in a game of emotional tug-of-war, pushing them away even as they sometimes regress and cling more tightly; young teens are crafting an identity separate from their parents and aligning ever more with peers. Even with peers, friendships begin to shift, and young adolescents develop a hyper awareness of the social pecking order, peer groups, and cliques. Young adolescents may seem to be more concerned about superficial measures of popularity as reflected in curated social media images than on true personal development.

Importantly, young adolescents begin to label themselves, seeking to craft an identity separate and unique from that which was formed as a member of their nuclear family. While a young person's understanding of each "label" may be incomplete, they are establishing the foundation of an identity that will inform who they become as an adult.

In the same way that toddlers test the physical boundaries of their world, young adolescents begin to test the boundaries of their individual convictions and beliefs about God and faith. No longer content to unquestioningly accept their parents or family members' beliefs, young adolescents must go through this internal struggle to begin the process of adult faith formation for themselves.

Because this process of change can be challenging and frustrating for both the young adolescent and their parents, it is important that the young person has strong relationships with other caring adults in their worshiping community. These relationships can offer acceptance not based on the variable ideas of popularity, but on the enduring value of the true self, the whole person who is recognized a beloved child of God. It is equally important that young adolescents be in relationship with older teens, who can serve as role models; and that young adolescents be given opportunities themselves to serve as mentors to younger children with whom to share God-given gifts and talents.

Older Adolescents

Older adolescents are entering a phase in which the world bombards them with expectations of adulthood. In this time of scary and awesome responsibility, they are forced to make choices about their futures and often these choices are driven by societally-defined narratives for success. Older teens need strong peer relationships with other teens who share a commitment to the alternate narrative of value as defined by a faith community. Likewise, older teens need strong relationships with adults in their faith community who can help them gain perspective and who can model adult Christian life.

Unlike younger adolescents who are just beginning to craft an identity separate from their parents, older teens have invested in the work of identity building for a few years and have a much stronger

sense of self Sometimes older adolescents are convinced they have it all figured out and become static or rigid in their identity, in the social strata of their school, and in their sense place in their community. They know who they are – or so they think. Older adolescents might be resistant to – or secretly afraid of – the idea that life holds opportunity for more growth and development. After all, the turbulent changes of their early adolescent years are a strong and recent memory and older teens may be ready to settle into a less tumultuous phase. With their strong sense of self, older teens may have the confidence to be excellent role-models for younger teens and children, as well as the ability to look outward with the intent of making a positive impact on the world at large.

As older teens grow closer to adulthood and are faced with the reality of leaving the familiar world of family, home, church, and school to pursue advanced education, work, or simply life of their own, they may become nostalgic for childhood experiences. Again, this equips them to be excellent role models and mentors to children who the older adolescents see as carrying on valued traditions and experiences.

Strategies for Transforming Worship to Enrich Faith Formation

With a better understanding of the misperceptions that prevent our worship from being truly engaging for all; and with a better understanding of the relational needs and developmental abilities of children and teens, we can now consider specific strategies to improve the worship experience.

Ritual and Repetition

Too often, we err in thinking that repetitive acts will be stale or boring and we invest unnecessary energy in redesigning worship experiences to be new and different. Yet ritual is the act of making repetitive tasks, even mundane tasks, sacred.

Young children are reassured by repetition. Older children enjoy the mastery that repetition affords them. Even in churches in which worship is not tightly prescribed by a prayer book or rubric, establishing consistent patterns of worship reinforces the sense of belonging for young children and appeals to the procedural sense of older children. An adolescent's developing sense of identity is shaped and reinforced by ritual – it is a consistent and fixed point in their very unanchored world. Meaningful ritual can be a North Star, helping adolescents to navigate rocky waters. Older adolescents contemplating the next steps in their lives may be reassured by ritual that is shared broadly across denominations. For a young person, knowing that they can expect the consistency in ritual regardless of what other new circumstances exist in their life is comforting and helps them to see themselves as part of a much broader faith community than their childhood parish.

Strategies for increasing the opportunity for faith formation in worship rituals include:

- Establish an awareness of the rhythm of worship by designing bulletins or other worship aids to use visual and verbal cues to explicitly mark the pattern of the service. Even though readings, prayers, and musical selections may change from week to week, help young people become aware of the ritual by identifying and naming each part of the service that remains consistent: the gathering, the telling of the story, the teaching, the response, the prayers of the people, the feast, the blessing, and the going forth into the world.

- Encourage parents of young children to actively assist their children in recognizing and participating in the rituals of worship: to gently guide the child's hands through the motions of blessing themselves, of mimicking the ritualized motions of the priests. Remind parents to point out the patterns of the service, modeling the language that defines each part: "Now we've gathered together to hear a story and a teaching about God. Now we are going to gather for a special meal."
- Design and offer "instructed" worship opportunities where clergy or other formation leaders offer commentary, enhanced participation, and instruction on every aspect of worship. In addition to being a wonderful way for children to increase their understanding and awareness, often adults who were never given similar explanations benefit from these experiences. In designing these services, create opportunities for participants to get out of the pews, to gather round and explore the altar, the pulpit, and other areas of the sanctuary usually reserved for the clergy and worship leaders
- Expand opportunities for older children and young adolescents to be full participants in the creation of ritual. Create or expand acolyte or altar server groups; giving leadership roles to older adolescents. Invite older children and young adolescents to be part of altar guilds, or to serve as greeters and ushers, all to engage their enjoyment of repetitive, procedural tasks.
- Remind parents and children of the role of ritual and routine in other aspects of their lives. Routine makes it easier to get children out the door to school in the morning; it makes evening and bedtime more pleasant for all involved. Beyond daily routines, talk about other areas in which we engage in ritualistic behavior. Ask young athletes if they have a favorite pre-game routine, meal, or clothing. Talk about family rituals such as returning to a favorite vacation spot, or eating certain meals on holidays or birthdays. Talk about family traditions, family names, favorite recipes, and inside jokes. Families cherish these rituals; equating them to church rituals will help families develop a heightened sense of appreciation for the rituals and patterns of worship.
- Invite children and teens to actively participate in the sacraments, not as passive recipients but as facilitators and purveyors. Entrust children with the responsibility of handling sacred objects. When mentored and lovingly guided, even young children can recognize something that is "special" or "precious" and treat it accordingly. Chalices, patens, candles, are as safe in little hands as with an adult, particularly if a child has been encouraged in the careful and reverential use of the item. Invite children to gather around a person being baptized, to participate in the baptism by pouring the water into the font, by dipping their fingers into the water and, along with the clergy, anointing the person. Some churches even invite children to be Eucharistic ministers, not only receiving, but offering the gift of Christ's body and blood to members of the congregation, regardless of age. This demonstrates not only to the children themselves but to the entire congregation that all are full members of the body of Christ.

Liturgical Seasons and the Sacredness of Every Day Life

While ritual and repetition is important and reassuring, unbroken or unrelieved repetition of ritual becomes deadening and rote. Gertrud Mueller Nelson reminds us that, "...linear time has no beginning and no end... When time is cyclic, it repeats, it looks forward and backward and gives one the opportunity to reflect on the past and look forward to and prepare for the future. Furthermore, the rhythmic repetition of feasts and fasts gives time a shape and life a balance and a purpose." (Nelson 29)

The subtle changes reflected in our liturgical seasons allow us to continue ritualistic worship in such a way that even though the structure of the worship is consistent, the differing seasons are marked and celebrated. Holy Days, feast days, holidays, and milestone celebrations provide just enough interruption to the regular routine that we might appreciate both break from regular worship, as well as the return to routine once the special event has passed. For children, special days become a fixed metric by which they can mark their growth, much like the height markings on doorframe. For adolescents, special days represent both consistency and promise—a way of reclaiming and celebrating childhood while moving toward an anticipated yet uncertain adulthood in which these days will continue to play a part.

Although discussed elsewhere in this book, it's important to note that the milestones that families celebrate in the lives of their children and teens also offer an opportunity to interrupt the repetition of our regular liturgy. Furthermore, celebrating these milestones in worship gives us the opportunity to make sacred that which is already being witnessed, acknowledged, and celebrated. Acknowledging milestones in worship allows us to bridge the gap between what happens in families' daily lives and their worship on Sunday. It is a way of recognizing and glorifying the sacred in every day. Strategies for increasing the opportunity for faith formation in liturgical seasons, the celebration of milestones, and the acknowledgement of the sacred in every day include:

- Modify the physical space of the church adding special seasonal liturgical elements such a crèche, candles, or advent wreaths, and structure the liturgy so that these items aren't just ornamental but are an essential part of the service. Invite children and teens to light Advent candles; to move the wise men closer to the crèche during the Christmas season; to chalk the door for Epiphany; to "bury" the alleluias during Lent; to traverse stations of the cross and to nail sins to the cross during Holy Week; to flower the cross at Easter; and to wear red and wave red streamers or carry red balloons in procession at Pentecost.
- Adapt the liturgy to recognize specific Holy Days and seek ways to make these days not only more participatory but to actively connect them to the daily lives of children and young people. Many saints' days have specific home rituals, practices, or associated meals. Research these and plan communal gatherings to follow the service or suggest ways families can celebrate at home – for example, publish recipes in the worship bulletin or newsletters for foods that can be prepared to celebrate an upcoming saint's day.
- Holy Days such as those acknowledging St. Francis and St. Nicholas offer especially exciting opportunities to engage families, children, young people (and, in the case of St. Francis, their pets). Many churches have a Blessing of the Animals, inviting families to bring their pets to worship to be blessed; and many celebrate St. Nicholas's Day, complimenting the stories of

Santa Claus with liturgies and activities celebrating the life of this saint. Even lesser known celebrations and practices – such as creating bread altars for St. Joseph’s day – can be experiential ways to engage young people in the liturgy. Invite children and teens to be part of the physical preparations and decorations; invite children to lead processions; and invited older children and teens to lead prayers.

- Look for ways to adapt the liturgy to include and amplify the personal stories and relationships in the lives of children and teens. On All Saints’ Day, invite people to bring in photographs of people who have been “saints” in their lives – a beloved relative, mentor, coach, or teacher. Display the photographs near the altar, on bulletin covers or worship screens, or share them on social media. As part of the liturgy, invite children and teens to offer prayers for the lives of these people, allowing the young person to name what they are thankful for in the person being celebrated. If there is not time to allow everyone to tell their story during liturgy, creating another way to share these stories—a physical or digital display—can still be referenced with general thanksgivings for the people mentioned.
- Name and bless the milestone events in child’s life as part of worship – these might include blessing of students (and their backpacks) at the beginning of the school year, recognition of Scouts (both Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts have specific days designated), offering monthly birthday blessings for all with upcoming birthdays that month, and blessing of graduating seniors. Solicit photos in advance of these events – share the first day of school pictures, Scout pictures, senior pictures, etc., with the rest of the congregation by printing them on bulletin covers, displaying them near the altar, projecting them on worship screens, or sharing them on social media. Sharing these pictures is a way to remind families that as they capture these special moments, that their faith community is present too, praying and blessing their children and teens.
- During liturgy, bless the “stuff” that accompanies milestones in a child’s life – bless bikes at the beginning of summer, surf boards in a seasonal beach community, or car keys for new drivers. Again, make a point of extending the reach of worship and a sense of the holy and sacred into families’ daily lives.
- When young people are involved in an outreach project, make sure to bless the items created or collected during worship. Invite children to bring the items to the altar. This serves to remind everyone that offerings to God are not just monetary contributions in the passed plate, but in our oblations - the offering of ourselves, our lives, our labors, and our efforts to God. If children make cards for people who are in nursing homes, collect canned goods for a food drive, prepare lunch bags for people who are homeless, or make fleece blankets for pet shelters, invite the young people to bring their efforts forth to be blessed.

Sacred Space and Sensory Experiences

Certainly we all recognize that “church” is the community of believers and is not to be confused with the building in which the believers are housed. While this is true, in considering ways in which faith formation can be enhanced during worship, it is important to not neglect or dismiss the physical space and location of where worship occurs.

Over the years, our church culture gradually realized the importance of modifying our sanctuaries for the comfort and access of adults. Ensuring access for people with limited mobility; improving sound systems; adding visual aids such as large print books, iPads, and projection screens; installing air conditioning for increased comfort—are all recent modifications designed to meet the physical needs of worshipers to enhance their participation. Yet we still often expect children to remain still and seated on hard pews in the back of the church, with the action occurring far up front, out of their sightlines.

Even so, when given the opportunity to enter, move freely, and explore, children and young people are especially attuned and responsive to being in a sacred space. Young children have an unbiased sense of wonder and awe. On walking in a sanctuary for the first time, they may come to a complete stop and simply drink in the atmosphere with full absorption. They are mesmerized by the light flickering through stained glass windows and the dance of candle flames. Older children and adolescents, whose lives are increasingly frenetic, also crave the stillness and sanctuary of being on holy ground. A particularly moving example of this occurs in the popular movie “The Fault in Our Stars,” based on the book by young adult author John Green. Three teens, all of whom have been given terminal cancer diagnoses, decide to eulogize one another in the short time that they have left to live. Although the story reflects a rather ambivalent relationship between these young people and a faith community, when it comes time for the sacred act of naming and celebrating their very lives, they are so intent on being in a sacred space that they break into a church!

Likewise, it is not just the space that instills a sense of the holy and sacred, but the many tactile and sensory experiences of worship. Children and teens, even more so than adults, are experiential learners. To create a formational worship experience, all the senses must be engaged. Indeed, even for adults, strong associations and memories are triggered by particular smells or the melody of a song. To help move worship from the “head” to the “heart,” involves this kind of deep sensory connection. Finally, in order to fully engage children and teens, as participants and not just passive witnesses to worship, they need to engage bodily. Many traditions invite participants in worship to stand, kneel, or to physically come forward for the Eucharist or for a blessing. Even meditating motionlessly is not a physically passive—the entire body is engaged in the act of stillness. Transformative worship will engage the whole person: mind, senses, body, and spirit.

Strategies for increasing the opportunity for faith formation in sacred spaces and through sensory experiences include:

- Actively and explicitly encourage families with young children to sit in the front pews so that the children can see and hear everything that is happening during the service. Often families instinctively sit near the back of the church so that if their children become unruly or agitated,

they can make a quick getaway. Establish a tradition of front-row seating. Make sure ushers and greeters are also prepared to encourage families with young children to move to the front.

- Consider creating a special seating area for families with young children. Remove the pews and install soft carpeting; small rocking chairs for little bodies soothed by repetitive motion; larger rocking chairs for parents with fussy babies; and lots of loose floor pillows for comfort. Make sure this area is situated so children are able to easily see and hear what is going on at the altar.
- During any special event, a baptism for example, make sure clergy invite children to come closer so that they can see the proceedings.
- Expand participation in the processional and recessional beyond acolytes, altar server, and choir members for any special event or occasion or even every Sunday. Invite all children to participate. Carrying banners, streamers, flowers, or other “props” will increase the sense of being part of a unified movement, rather than just merely walking down the aisle of the church. Make sure to have adults near the front of the church to help young children know where to go and to find their way back to their families in the pews.
- Integrate more sensory experiences in worship through tactile prayer stations and designate a point during worship when children and teens (as well as any adults who need to move around) can interact with them. Incorporate natural elements – sand, stones, fire, or water – in these stations. Create stations that invite participants to write a prayer, a name, a word, or a phrase; or to engage in a creative act—touch paint to paper or weave a bit of yarn. Even additional sounds can be introduced to worship—use a small tone bell or rain stick to cue the start of a specific prayer, story, or teaching.
- Outside of normal worship time, invite children and families to a tactile exploration of the sanctuary. Allow and encourage them to smell of incense and candle wax; to taste wine and bread (make sure to have real bread); to look for colorful patterns in stained glass, ornamental linens, kneelers, or other liturgical artwork; to hear the sound of an organ or other instruments; to feel the touch of a hug at the peace, or the laying of hands in healing prayer, or the anointment of holy oil. Having intentionally experienced all of these sensations, when they next encountering them during worship will enhance the experience for children.
- Provide quiet activity bags for young children in the pews. Many children are better able to focus on what is being said if their hands are engaged in repetitive motion. Crayons, paper, prayer cards, chenille stems, stickers, and small stuffed toys are all good items to include. Refrain from referring to these bags as “busy bags.” Language matters, and the word “busy” implies something that will keep a child occupied or distracted because they are incapable of engaging in worship. One suggestion might be to refer to the bags as “Pray & Play” bags - this implies an age-appropriate engagement in prayer and worship.
- In addition to prayer books, Bibles, and hymnals, stock each pew with children’s story Bibles. Not only does this send a strong message that children are welcome and expected to be present in liturgy, but it connects the sacred space to the sacred story in an age-appropriate way.

- Encourage and facilitate young peoples' participation in choirs, praise bands, and other musical ensembles. The ability to read music is not a pre-requisite. Young children are aural learners and often have an amazing aptitude to learn music by ear. Consider the “paperless” music practices suggested by the organization Music that Makes Community that allow everyone to enrich their spiritual life through singing. While there is always a place for formal music in a sacred setting, it is also important to shift the intent of music to being something participatory rather than something to be passively consumed. Older children, adolescents, and teens may also participate in school music ensembles as both vocalists and instrumentalists – invite them to share their gifts during worship.
- Consider ways to take the liturgy out of the sanctuary into another venue entirely, or into the outdoors. Some faith communities such as St. Lydia's in Brooklyn offer “dinner church” in which the entire service is conducted over a meal. Their “waffle church” service is offered earlier than regular dinner church, specifically timed to appeal to families and children. Church of the Woods in New Hampshire offers liturgical worship, celebrated by participants gathering and hiking in outdoors.

Scripture and Sacred Storytelling

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1, NRSV)

We are people of the word. Jesus led with stories. Stories define our identity as Christians. In the formation of young people, the sharing and perpetuation of our sacred stories is the primary way we pass on the faith. In fact, David Csinos, a theological researcher and professor, suggests that children's theology is inherently storied. He discovered that, “...children... all possessed a narrative approach to theology, not only drawing on stories to make meaning, but also using narrative as a way to communicate their theology.” (Csinos, 2016). Children and teens intuitively connect to fairy tales, myths, epic adventures, fantasy – and are receptive to the power of the stories of our scripture. While very young children blur the line between fantasy and reality, older children can both distinguish reality while being simultaneously receptive to the greater mythos embedded in stories. Our challenge is to make sure that as part of the transition to adulthood young people don't discard or dismiss a scriptural story to which too narrow a meaning or explanation has been prescribed. In sermons, preaching, and teaching, we must create encourage an ever-growing exegesis that allows adolescents and teens to circle back to the stories of their childhood, finding ever deeper meaning as life experiences expand the worldview and context they bring to scripture. In traditions that follow a lectionary cycle, each time a young person re-hears a story, it should be an opportunity and invitation to go deeper, rather than just a simple re-iteration.

Unfortunately, in our worship and liturgies, too often our stories have become dry and lifeless, our words stripped of power and passion. We reduce the telling of the Gospel and the sharing of the Good News as a chance to offer a sermon with moralistic lessons or simplistic interpretations. And yet, when children and teens are actively engaged in not only hearing or reading scripture, but of being invited into the narrative itself, the formation possibilities are infinite.

When we share our scriptural stories, we walk a fine line in adapting our language to engage new or specific audiences – which might include children – and by embracing the traditional language as part of a shared ritual, one that transcends our lifetime and might help young people connect to something larger than themselves. There is a need for both approaches. What is important is that regardless of the language we use to share our sacred stories, we do so in a way that children, adolescents, and teens are invited to share in the telling.

Strategies for increasing the opportunity for faith formation in sharing scripture include:

- Rethink “children’s sermons.” While some disturbing or challenging topics might be off limits, sermons or teaching in worship should not be dumbed down or simplified for children; rather the message may simply require some additional interpretation or explanation so that children and teens can connect. If children are called to come forward during the sermon to better engage in a conversation about scripture, they should never be put on the spot or questioned in a way that is primarily for the benefit of the rest of the congregation. This is a sacred conversation, not a moment for a congregational chuckle. Questions posed to children should be reflective and not designed to elicit cute answers. “What do you think?” or the classic Godly Play posit “I wonder” is a better approach to engage children in conversation rather than just a quest for a desired answer.
- Consider using the sermon or teaching time to re-tell the story of the Gospel in an innovative way that invites people – including children and teens – into a more fully realized version of the story. The Network of Biblical Story Tellers offers many resources and suggestions to hone the craft of telling a biblical story.
- When preaching, to children, recognize that the use of metaphors is challenging – children are apt to remember the metaphor, not the thing it points to.
- Supplement the reading of scripture with visual illustrations of gospel stories. A quick image search will yield countless examples; many digitized collections of religious and liturgical art exist online. One way to invite children and teens to delve deeply into scriptural stories is to show visual depictions and ask, “Where are you in this story? Where are you in this picture?” Remember to offer a variety of visual depictions of scriptural stories. Young children have a very literalist interpretation of stories and images – it is important to present a variety of multi-cultural depictions to capture the universality of scripture stories and the opportunity for all to engage.

Conclusions

The idea that liturgy is the work of the people – and that “the people” includes children and adolescents – challenges our understandings about the role of children, adolescents, and teens in worship. As we consider ways to adapt our liturgical and worship practices to enrich the formation possibilities for young people, perhaps the most important action we can take is to invite those young people into the work of creating liturgy!

Shawn Schreiner, priest and author, explains,

“Young children need to be invited in age-appropriate ways to be ministers of the faith. They should never be given the message that they are the ‘future of the church.’ They are the church with us, right here and now, and they have their rightful place in the world and in their faith communities. What better way to keep children in the church, than to invite them to engage in leadership from the earliest of ages! More than keeping them in church, we are modeling that baptism really does equal ministry.” (Schreiner 23).

This leadership, this call to work, may take the form of inviting young people and their families to be part of planning teams for worship. This might occur on seasonal basis or require a regular commitment. Alternately, rather than tightly orchestrated events with clearly prescribed roles, some faith communities have adapted participation in their liturgies to be much more fluid, inviting worshippers to step into a desired role on an ad hoc basis. For example, the family service at Grace Episcopal Church in Oak Park, Illinois, as described by Schreiner, allows children to self-select the roles. Those wishing to be Eucharistic ministers, for example, do so by donning special color-coded aprons, designed to be worn when offering either bread or wine/juice. Similarly, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber leads a faith community in Denver, Colorado, the House of All Sinners and Saints, that is based on the premise of being, “‘anti-excellence/pro-participation’, meaning that the liturgy is led by the people who show up. The pastors offer the Eucharistic prayer and (most times) the sermon; all the other parts of the liturgy are led by people from where they are sitting.” (<http://www.houseforall.org/>)

These models of doing liturgy transform our understanding of “the work of the people” and more closely resemble the joyful and participatory Montessori idea of the child at play.

“The child, unlike the adult, is not on his way to death. He is on his way to life. His work is to fashion a man in the fullness of his strength. By the time the adult exists, the child has vanished. So the whole life of the child is an advance toward perfection, toward a greater completeness. From this we may infer that the child will enjoy doing the work needed to complete himself. The child’s life is one in which work—the doing of one’s duty—begets joy and happiness.” (Montessori 30)

We are an Easter people, believing that we journey not towards death but towards life, and our liturgy should reflect this. Rather than consider how we might adapt our liturgy to enrich the formation of children, we might better consider liturgy to be a platform through which our children can transform our entire congregations, calling us back to beauty, wonder, love, and joy.

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