

# THE WHAT AND HOW OF INTERGENERATIONAL WORSHIP

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## Worship

It seems as if more and more churches are looking for ways to provide an intergenerational worship experience. Also, more families are looking for churches where they feel comfortable to worship as a family. Worshiping as an intergenerational community is not easy. It is challenging to plan a worship that is intellectually stimulating for the adults and spiritually meaningful for the kids. Often the trap that churches fall into is either dumbing down the message or inserting kid-friendly moments like children's sermons. Unfortunately, this rarely satisfies anyone.

After all, what is intergenerational worship? Is it merely people of all ages being able to worship together? The simple answer would be 'yes.' I believe it is more than that. At the church that I serve, intergenerational worship encompasses the full diversity spectrum of the congregation. Not only does it address the young, old, and everything in-between, but it addresses the young in faith as well as those that have grown-up in church all their lives. It includes interfaith families that are trying to navigate both culture and faith traditions. It includes those that learn audibly versus visually and tactilely. Worshiping as an intergenerational community pushes and challenges us to be aware of how all in worship experience God's presence; opens us up to the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit; give us permission to not claim to know it all; and exercise grace, forgiveness, and unconditional love

to those that we deem different than ourselves.

Children are a gift in worship. They remind adults that God only requires us to come as we are, to ask questions, and to remain curious. Senior adults are a gift in worship. They remind us that life can be hard, but God is faithful. And all ages in between are a gift in worship. They mirror the complex, diverse, and beautiful image of God and God's creation.

So, how does one go about worshiping as an intergenerational community? Depending on the current makeup of your congregation and your worship style, I propose three tiers.

## Tier 1: getting your feet wet

For whatever reason, your church has decided that they want to be more intergenerational. Usually at this stage this means wanting to be more welcoming to families with younger children. However, simple adjustments and changes can make a big impact for everyone's worship experience.

- **Assess your current worship structure.** A great exercise for your elders or worship committee to do is to observe worship through the eyes of someone visiting your church for the first time. From the moment one walks into the church, during worship, after worship during fellowship time, write down how you felt? Was there someone to greet you at the door and hand you a bulletin? Were you expected to know certain rituals of worship like when to stand, sing, or pray or was that explained to you? Did people greet you during fellowship time?
- **Think about what makes all feel welcomed and comfortable in worship.** Consider allowing drinks and food in your sanctuary. Kids hardly go anywhere without a juice cup or a bag of Cheerios or Goldfish crackers in their hands. Not to mention, allowing adults to have caffeine may do wonders to the worship experience.
- **Consider your worship space.** Is there ample room for parents to park their strollers? Allowing strollers into the sanctuary invites families to worship while their child sleeps and allows them immediate access to things the child needs. Having said that, is there ample room for those who need walkers, crutches, or wheelchairs? In my city, parking space is a prime issue, but it shouldn't be in a worship space.
- **Provide options.** Not all kids or parents for that matter feel comfortable putting their kids in the nursery or Sunday School, especially if it is their first time visiting. By simply having a table with crayons and coloring pages gives families an option to worship together if that is what they prefer. Adults need options as well. By simply inviting them to worship and engage as they feel comfortable, allows them to worship as they are and experience God in freeing ways.
- **Make a covenant.** It's not easy worshiping as an intergenerational community. Kids' noises can be loud and distracting. There may be parts of worship that you just don't care for. These things can focus our attention away from the wonderful benefits an intergenerational community brings. By making a covenant, where the church acknowledges the challenges and yet embraces the benefits, can be a wonderful

resource to all. Here is the [covenant](#) that my church annually agrees to. It only takes one bad experience or dirty look from someone to ensure that the parent holding a crying baby never comes back.

## Tier 2: ready to make intentional changes to worship

So, you've gotten your feet wet, lived with the possibilities, and now want to experiment a little more. The best opportunities to try something new are on special Sundays like World Communion, Baptism of the Lord, Advent, or Lent. Parishioners are more open and accepting to try something new when there is a clear theme. Here are some guidelines to consider:

- **Consider providing segregated times.** This may seem counter-intuitive to having an intergenerational worship, but it is okay to have moments in worship where kids and adults are segregated for a specific amount of time. My church holds an optional Sunday School program for the first 35-40 minutes of worship, in which they return to worship to participate in communion, baptisms, and community prayers. This allows the kids to participate in parts of worship that are naturally interactive (meaning after the sermon time.)
- **Plan baptisms, communion, and prayers to be interactive.** Allow the kids to sit up front when there is a baptism. For communion, I have had the kids come up and help me bless the Lord's Supper. Community prayers can be done in different ways other than verbally sharing joys and concerns: have them come up to light a candle; write or draw their prayer on a card; or plan an [interactive prayer station](#).
- **Make singing hymns or songs a teachable moment.** No matter if you have an organ or a band, most people can't read music (like me) or quickly catch on to the tune. Take this opportunity to actually teach the hymn or song. Many times, my music director will teach the chorus while the choir sings the stanzas. This is a great way to build up music appreciation for both adults and kids.
- **Evaluate your sermon and preaching style.** If your style of preaching gravitates more towards dissecting the Greek or Hebrew roots of a particular word in the bible, consider balancing that with telling a story. Storytelling is a great way to engage people and connect your point to how they can apply it to their lives. Storytelling can come in different forms: written, verbal, or visual.

## Tier 3: we're loud, we're proud, we're intergenerational and there is nothing you can do about it.

You have now embraced your identity as an intergenerational worshipping community and are ready to permanently incorporate ways to worship intergenerationally. Then you should know that it is more than about making worship more kid-friendly. In fact, it actually has less to do with that and more to do with keeping things simple, applicable,

and accessible. Whatever you plan, make sure you:

- **Provide different entry points into worship for all ages.** Whether an adult or a child, everyone has a different comfort level in worship. So people should be able to enter into prayer, listen to a sermon, sing a song, and engage in worship where they are spiritually, physically, and mentally.
- **Remember these 2 ingredients when planning worship:** make it interactive and consider how it involves all five senses of touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing. Theological concepts and biblical stories can be abstract. By allowing people to engage in biblical stories interactively, it connects people's lives to God's word.
- **Involve everyone and give them an out.** While everyone should feel invited to participate, everyone should feel just as invited to not participate, yet still feel part of worship. For example, when my church sets up interactive prayer stations, we also allow people to stay seated in the pews to sing along or meditate to [taize](#) songs being sung.

Here are some examples of what I have done incorporating the above:

- Instead of a sermon, my Head of Staff and I invited parishioners to ask us any [question about God, the bible, and theology](#). Both adults and kids participated. My favorite question was when a kid asked, "Why is the church so tall?"
- During my sermon, I told a story that involved an orange. I had the ushers pass out an orange for each parishioner and invited them to smell, feel, and taste the orange as I told them the story.
- Frequently throughout the year, we set up 3-4 [interactive prayer stations](#) for adults and kids to participate in.

In October, we are expanding worship and focusing on hunger beginning with World Communion Sunday. Our cinema group will be showcasing the movie "Food Stamped." We will be challenging participants to take the hunger challenge where they live off a food stamped budget. To give them resources, there will be lunch offered featuring recipes that one can make on a food stamped budget. And our stewardship team will encourage participants to donate what they would usually spend on groceries to our weekly food pantry program.