

Intergenerational Worship

Edward D. Seely

Introduction

Many churches face a challenging dilemma: How do we plan worship services that will engage younger people and still meet the needs of those who are older? When a church loses a sense of balance and tilts toward one side or the other, disharmony typically occurs. If the church favors the young and plans services that the youth want (or, more likely, what they think the youth want), many older people often protest. On the other hand, if the church ignores its youth and doesn't include elements in the worship service that they can relate to and connect with, they protest, some even to the point of refusing to attend.

What about those even younger, the children? How do you plan a service that will be significant for them and for adults?

To answer these questions, as all others, we turn to God and his Word. How did families worship in the Bible?

Intergenerational Worship in the Bible

1. Ask the participants to form groups of four.
 - a. Request that they work first as individuals to examine the following texts. Project the texts (except for the parenthetical content beside them) so all can see, e.g., on a flipchart, chalkboard, overhead projector, or by using a PowerPoint-type program on an LCD projector. Assign each person the study of at least two passages, and ask each to be prepared to explain what the Scriptures mean for including all ages in corporate worship.
 - 1) Exodus 33:7-11 (Note that in v. 8 “all the people” and in v. 10 “all stood and worshiped” means children were included.)
 - 2) Leviticus 23:33-44 (See especially vs. 42-43.)
 - 3) Numbers 10:1-10 (Observe that in vs. 3, 10 “the whole community” is to be involved, including children.)
 - 4) Deuteronomy 15:19-23 (Note especially v. 20.)
 - 5) Deuteronomy 16:9-17 (See especially vs. 11, 14. Children are to be at the feasts [and at the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days!] that their “joy will be complete” [v. 15].)
 - 6) Deuteronomy 31:9-13, 31 (Observe especially vs. 12, 13.)
 - 7) Psalm 8 (Notice especially v. 2.)
 - 8) Matthew 18:1-6 (cf. Mark 9:35-37; Luke 9:46-47. How do these texts relate to intergenerational worship in the church? Though likely not a worship

experience, Jesus explained the strong connection between welcoming children and welcoming himself into one's presence, exactly what is done in the corporate public worship of God's people.)

- 9) Matthew 19:13-15 (cf. Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17 [v.15: even babies were included] What does this event have to do with church worship? Though the occasion may not have involved worship, especially corporate worship, it is a clear indication that Jesus wants children in his presence, precisely what occurs the worship of God's covenant people.)
 - 10) Matthew 25:31-40 (esp. v. 40)
 - 11) Luke 2:41-52 (esp. v. 42)
 - 12) John 6:1-13 (v. 9 Jesus used the bread and fish a boy brought to feed the people. How does this passage relate to intergenerational corporate worship? Again, though likely not a worship service, it establishes the fact that a child's presence and contribution are deemed valuable to the Lord.)
 - 13) Acts 20:7-12 (The Greek words for "young man" in vs. 9 and 12 indicate Eutychus was likely from 8-12 years old.) See also Acts 21:5, children.
- b. After five minutes of individual reading and reflection, ask the groups to have each member share with the others in the small group what he or she found in his or her passages.
 - c. After 20 minutes reconvene the small groups into the large group, and ask the reporters to share their group's findings (one at a time per group) for each text. Add any of the information in the parentheses beside the texts in a. above that has not been mentioned in the group reports.
 - **Be sure to point out that the Bible passages clearly show that all the people in God's covenant community, from the youngest child to the oldest adult, participated in Israel's and the church's corporate worship events.**

Intergenerational Worship Today

2. Summarize what we have just seen in the Scriptures: that God has always intended for children and all other age groups to be a part of the corporate worship of his covenant people.
 - a. Next, ask the participants to answer this question, first individually for 10 minutes and then in their groups: "What are you doing now in your worship services in your home church that will engage all ages, including even young children, teenagers, young adults, middle age adults and older adults?"
 - b. After 10 minutes ask the groups to reconvene as one large group and their recorders to state, one at a time per group until all have reported, what they are doing in their churches to include children and teenagers as well as adults in their

worship services. Project the responses recorders give so all can see and record them.

Planning Worship that Will Engage All Generations

3. Now ask the attendees to focus on this question, first individually for 10 minutes and then in their small groups: “In the light of what we’ve studied in the Bible in this session and in our previous lessons, and from what we’ve just heard that others are doing, what modifications can we make in our public church worship services to include all ages so everyone can feel meaningfully involved and sense that he or she is in God’s presence and in dialogue with him?” (NOTE: Consider suggesting that they organize themselves into three new groups for this task on the basis of their interest: [1] a group for those who prefer to focus on children, [2] another group for those who want to think about teenagers, and [3] a third group for those who wish to concentrate on adults.)
 - a. After 30 minutes, ask all to reconvene and for the reporters to share their group’s work, one group and one subject area (e.g., involving children) at a time. List the responses on the device you used in 2.c. above.
 - b. When all the groups have reported, add any of the following that were not mentioned by them, many of which have been done in other churches to include all ages. Don’t wait until the end and add all these at once; mention them after all the groups have reported on a particular age range (e.g., children, teenagers). Don’t overwhelm the group with too many ideas. Select from the following list several that seem most helpful.

Engaging Children in Corporate Worship

As Leaders and Special Contributors

- Older children can be asked to offer a prayer in the service.
- Older children, who read well, can be taught to read with expression and to read the Bible lesson before the sermon. Variations of this involvement of children include one or more children reading the text in different languages in addition to English and a child reciting the Bible text from memory with special emphasis, voice inflections, and gestures that help communicate the text accurately.
- Children, who play a musical instrument well, can be asked to do so in the worship service, either individually or as part of an ensemble that practices and contributes regularly. Even young children can learn to play a hand drum, such as a djembe.
- A children’s choir could be formed and sing several times a year in worship services. The choir can also sing with the adult choir antiphonally.
- Older children can usher and hand out children’s bulletins.

- Where the church approves, older children can pass the offering plates. Some churches require only ordained deacons to serve in this capacity, so be sure to consult the pastor first before asking children to participate in this manner.
- Working alongside adults, children can help clean and set up the sanctuary. Doing so helps them develop a sense of investment in and caring for the worship center where they meet God in a special way in a hallowed setting dedicated to his worship.
- Children can serve as acolytes.
- Children, who are interested in artwork, can be asked to make a banner for the sanctuary. It would be especially significant to ask their parents to make this a family project with each member of the family participating.
- A group of older children could prepare dramatic readings of Bible passages on which the sermon is based. Two ways this can be done are acting out a passage in pantomime while it is being read aloud by someone else and by memorizing spoken parts in the text and acting it out in that manner, for example Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).
- Children, together with teenage siblings and their parents, can serve as greeters prior to and after the worship service.
- Children can be invited to express their faith in Jesus Christ, either in an individual expression or by being interviewed by the worship leader. (This gives the congregation an opportunity to learn what Jesus meant when he said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:3-4)
- A boy and a girl can each carry a basket of food to the front of the sanctuary during a point in a Thanksgiving service. The two baskets represent gifts of food the congregation has collected for a local food pantry for those who are needy.
- Older children can carry flags of other countries into the sanctuary at the beginning of a worship service that has missions as its theme.
- Children, together with the rest of their family, can participate in lighting a candle in a large Advent wreath in the beginning of a worship service during the season of Advent. One child can light the candle for the day, another can explain the symbolism of that candle, another family member can read a passage from the Bible, and another can lead in prayer. A different family can do so for each of the other Sundays and at Christmas or Christmas Eve. The same can be done with a Lenten triad during the season of Lent; the triad is a triangular base, covered with purple cloth, which contains one candle for each week of Lent.
- A representative sample of children can serve on a Children's Advisory Council or a children's Worship Focus Group to comment on worship services and make suggestions for engaging children more fully in corporate worship.

Participating with Everyone Else

- Encourage families with children, especially those with small children, to sit as close to the front as possible, so the children can more easily see all that is going on and feel a part of the service.
- Singing
 - Sing at least one song in each service that the children have learned at home or in their classes.
 - Especially include songs the children like to sing.
 - Parents pointing to the words on the printed page will help their children learn the songs and help them increase their reading ability! Suggest to parents they explain the meaning of any words the children don't understand.
 - Use songs where the lyrics are understandable and relate to the children's experiences.
- Several means can be used to engage children during periods of prayer that will help them feel they are praying:
 - Regularly recite memorized prayers (e.g., the Lord's Prayer).
 - Use litanies (written prayers where the leader and congregation speak responsively).
 - Include bidding prayers (usually during the General Prayers, where the leader mentions subjects and allows a brief time after each subject for people to offer their prayers either in silence or spoken out loud [e.g., "Now we pray for those who are ill." Then after a short while, "We pray for those out of work." Then, "We pray for those who mourn the loss of loved ones."]).
 - Whoever offers prayers should include concerns of children in the prayer (e.g., worries about the well being of parents and siblings, problems with friends, their health, school subjects).
 - When prayers are printed in the bulletin or another source, make them be easy to read, e.g., easy words, short sentences, and, if possible, larger print type (which will also help older adults).¹
 - Ask the whole congregation to write their prayer needs on a card or mention them to the pastor prior to the congregational prayer (the General Prayers). At that time make a special point to invite the children to do so as well.
- Give children a Children's Bulletin, which has activities in it, especially activities that are related to the service for the day. For example, it can have a page for younger children who can't write to just draw a picture of something that they hear in the sermon, a page for older children to answer questions about subjects in the sermon and that explains an aspect of the worship service (such as why we have an offering and telling why their offering is also valuable), and another page for older children for note-taking.

¹ The first five means adapted from Carolyn Brown, "Including Children in the Worshiping Congregation." Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Conference on Liturgy and Music, Denver, Colorado, July 8, 2004.

- Include the following in the sermon:
 - Use words children can understand. When a complex word or term has to be used, define and explain it, and give an illustration.
 - Use examples children can relate to and that include children as well as those who are older.
 - Make sure at least one point in the sermon applies to children, and specify for the children what that point is, including what it means for their lives.²
 - Provide an outline of the sermon in the bulletin.
 - Use visual aids in the sermon.
 - Provide some questions in the church bulletin under the title of the sermon that give the children and others specific subjects to listen for that will be included in the sermon.
- Children should be encouraged to give during the offering *from what they have earned*. The understanding of offering what they are giving to God and their involvement in doing so is enhanced if the congregation brings their gifts to the communion table or another designated place in the apse.
- Invite the whole congregation to say certain things at specific points during the service, for example:
 - Saying “Amen” following the words, “through Jesus Christ, our Lord” at the end of prayers.
 - Saying “Thanks be to God” after the Bible reading when the person who was reading concludes the Bible reading by saying, “This is the Word of the Lord.”
 - Reciting a confession of faith, such as the Apostles’ Creed, and a commitment to obey directly engages children in an edifying experience and important witness to any visitors who may not be Christians.
 - Allow children who want to make a personal confession of faith to do so as well. Those who have had an especially significant experience in their faith can be allowed to share it with the congregation in the response to God’s Word, or at the end of the service, followed by a congregational expression of thanksgiving to God.
- Use antiphonal readings for the Bible lesson, such as in Psalm 136, where the worship leader reads one part of the verse and the congregation reads the refrain, or where the choir reads one part and the rest of the congregation reads the refrain. Even small children can learn to say the refrain, thus feeling themselves being a part of the service.
- Reading Bible passages responsively (where the leader and the congregation take turns reading the verses aloud) involves children and all other ages together.
- Participating in the sacraments engages children and employs all five senses to help them worship and learn.

² The first three concepts adapted from Carolyn Brown, “Preaching God’s Word to Us AND Our Children.” Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Conference on Liturgy and Music, Denver, Colorado, July 9, 2004.

- Being baptized themselves, if they weren't as infants, facilitates a life changing relationship with God and marks them as members of his covenant people, the body of Christ.
- Gather the children around the baptismal font, or other location, whenever a baptism is celebrated
- Partaking of the Lord's Supper when old enough to understand its meaning connects children with Christ and fellow believers in a profound and life shaping experience. Some churches do not permit children who haven't made confession of faith to receive the elements, but they do invite the children to come to the front of the sanctuary for a special blessing when the congregation comes to the communion rail and kneels. The pastor then lays his or her hands on and blesses the children.
- Greet children as well as older people after the service. Warmly express delight that they were present in the worship of the Lord.

Engaging Teenagers in Corporate Worship

As Leaders and Special Contributors

- Those teens with skills in music and leadership can lead in the singing of hymns, psalms, and songs. They can teach a new song to the congregation, in particular one that they especially enjoy, that is applicable to all ages, and that most others will find meaningful.
- Teenagers can be asked to offer a prayer in the service.
- Those who read well can be taught to read with expression the Bible lesson before the sermon.
- Where the church approves, teens can pass the offering plates. Where allowed the teens can help with the counting of the offering.
- Young people, who play a musical instrument well, can be asked to play in the worship service, either individually or as part of an ensemble of teenagers or as part of an adult group that practices and contributes in worship services regularly.
- A teen choral group could be formed and sing several times a year in worship services. Teenagers should be invited also to sing in the adult choir or praise team.
- A group of teens could prepare dramatic readings of Bible passages on which the sermon is based, as described above, for example using Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and other narrative texts.
- Teens who write poetry can be asked to read a poem that they have written, or that someone else has written, that applies to the sermon subject.
- Youths, who are interested in artwork, can be asked to make a banner for the sanctuary. It would be especially good to ask their parents to make this a family project with each member of the family participating. Teens may construct artistic expressions in other media as well, e.g., a sculpture of a Biblical event.
- Ask teenagers to usher.

- Teens can help clean and set up the sanctuary. Doing so helps them develop a sense of investment in and caring for the worship center.
- If a sound system is used, teenagers can be asked to operate it.
- A teenager who knows sign language could be asked to sign for any who are hard of hearing in the congregation.
- Teenagers, together with their younger siblings and their parents, can serve as greeters prior to and after the worship service.
- Teens can be given an opportunity to publicly express their faith.
 - Teens who want to make a confession of faith can do so.
 - Reciting a confession of faith, such as the Apostles' Creed, and a commitment to obey, directly engages teens in an edifying experience and an important witness to any visitors, especially other teenagers, who may not be Christians.
 - Those who've had an especially significant experience in their faith can be invited to share it with the congregation as part of their response to God's Word, or they can do so after the service, followed by a congregational expression of thanksgiving to God.
 - Teens who are maturing in Christ can be asked to present a sermon, where the church approves and with pastoral guidance.
- A commissioning can be held in the worship service, as part of the congregation's responding to God's Word, for a teen or a group of teens leaving on a short-term mission trip. Ask the commissioned person or group to report to the congregation upon returning.
- Ask at least two teenagers to serve on the Worship Planning Team in your church.
- A representative sample of teenagers can serve on a Teen Advisory Council or a teenagers' Worship Focus Group to comment on worship services and make suggestions for engaging young people more fully in corporate worship. Teens (more than one) could also be asked to serve on the church's worship planning team.
- Teenagers can carry flags of other countries into the sanctuary at the beginning of a worship service that has missions as its theme.
- Teenagers, together with the rest of their family, can participate in lighting a candle in a large Advent wreath in the beginning of a worship service during the season of Advent. A child or teenager can light the candle for the day, another can explain the symbolism of that candle, another family member can read a passage from the Bible, and another can lead in prayer. A different family can do so for each of the other Sundays and at Christmas or Christmas Eve. The same can be done with a Lenten triad during the season of Lent; the triad is a triangular base, covered with purple cloth, which contains one candle for each week of Lent.

Participating with Everyone Else

- Singing

- Sing at least one song in each service that the teenagers have learned at home, in their youth groups, or in their classes.
- As much as possible include songs the young people like to sing.
- Use songs where the lyrics are understandable and relate to everyone and to teens in particular.
- Several means can be used to involve teenagers during periods of prayer that will help them feel they are praying:
 - Whoever offers prayers should include concerns of teens in the prayer (e.g., worries about well being of parents and siblings, problems with friends, their health, what they will do for a living, school subjects).
 - Ask the teens to write their prayer needs on a card or mention them to the pastor prior to the congregational prayer.
 - Include bidding prayers (see above).
 - Use litanies (see above).
 - Regularly recite memorized prayers (e.g., the Lord's Prayer).
- Include the following in the sermon:
 - Provide some questions in the church bulletin under the title of the sermon that give the teens and others specific subjects to listen for that will be included in the sermon.
 - Insert an outline of the sermon in the bulletin or on a projection screen. A sentence outline helps the congregation most accurately understand the main points of the sermon, not only during the worship service, but long after for those who save the insert together with any notes they've added.
 - Use words teenagers can understand. When a sophisticated word or term has to be used, define and explain it, and give an illustration.
 - Use examples teens can relate to and include teenagers in illustrations as well as those younger and older.
 - Apply at least one point in the sermon to teenagers; specify for them what that point is and what it means for their lives.
 - Use visual aids that are of excellent quality.
- Teens should be encouraged to give during the offering from what they have earned. The understanding of offering what they are giving to God and their involvement in doing so is enhanced if the congregation brings their gifts to the communion table or another designated place in the apse.
- Use antiphonal readings for the Bible lesson, such as in Psalm 136 (see above).
- Reading Bible passages responsively (where the leader and the congregation take turns reading the verses) involves teens and all other ages together.
- Participating in the sacraments engages teens and employs all five senses.
 - Being baptized themselves, if they weren't as infants, facilitates a life changing relationship with God and marks them as members of his covenant people, the body of Christ.
 - Partaking of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, connects teens with Christ and fellow believers in a profound and life shaping experience.

- Greet teenagers as well as older people after the service. Warmly express delight that they were present in the worship of the Lord.

Engaging Adults in Corporate Worship

As Leaders and Special Contributors

- Adults can be asked to lead in offering a prayer in the service.
- Adults, who read well, can be taught to read with expression and to read the Bible lesson before the sermon.
- Where denominational and local church policy permit, adults who are not necessarily office bearers can be involved in distributing the elements of Holy Communion.
- Adults with musical and leadership skills can lead in the singing of psalms, hymns, and songs.
- Adults who play a musical instrument well, can be asked to play in the worship service, either individually or as part of an ensemble that practices and contributes regularly.
- Those who enjoy singing can join the choir or praise team and/or form a singing group.
- Adults can offer dramatic readings, as described above.
- Adults can usher.
- They can be invited to help clean and set up the sanctuary. Doing so helps them feel an investment in and caring for the worship center and develop a sense of the holiness of God in this place dedicated to his worship.
- Those with an interest and ability in technical matters can operate a sound system.
- Adults, who are interested in artwork, can be asked to make a banner for the sanctuary. It would be especially good to make this a family project with each member of the family participating. They may contribute art work in other media as well, e.g., a sculpture of a Biblical event.
- A commissioning could be held during the worship service for one or more adults leaving on a short-term mission trip.
- Adults can serve on a Worship Team that, together with the Pastor and the Minister of Music, plans the corporate worship services for the church.
- An adult can give a word of encouragement before the sermon, preparing hearers for the importance of listening well, or even more significantly after the sermon as part of the congregation's response to God's Word as encouragement to obey that teaching from the Bible. This encouragement will be especially effective if the adult doing so is a respected member of the congregation.

Participating with Everyone Else

- Sing at least one of the best of the historic hymns in each service. Doing so helps adults experience the blessings of a good tradition and enables the worshipers of all ages to learn Biblical theology in an enjoyable manner.
- Several means can be used to engage adults as well as all others during periods of prayer that will help them feel they are praying:
 - Regularly recite memorized prayers (e.g., the Lord's Prayer).
 - Use litanies (see above).
 - Include bidding prayers (see above).
 - Ask the adults to write their prayer needs on a card or mention them to the pastor prior to the congregational prayer.
 - When prayers are printed in the bulletin or another source, make them be easy to read, e.g., easy words, short sentences, and, if possible, larger print type (which will also help children and older adults).
- Include the following in the sermon:
 - Provide some questions in the church bulletin under the title of the sermon that give the congregation specific subjects to listen for that will be included in the sermon.
 - Insert an outline of the sermon in the bulletin or on a projection screen. A sentence outline helps the congregation most accurately understand the main points of the sermon, not only during the worship service, but long after for those who save the insert together with any notes they've added.
 - For the most part offer sermons that are focused on and explain a passage of the Bible. Expository sermons, that help people connect with, understand, and apply God's Word in their lives, provide what they most long for and need to know.
 - Use words children can understand without definition; in that way all adults will comprehend easily what you are saying. When a sophisticated word or term has to be used, define and explain it, and give an illustration.
 - Use examples people can relate to for each point in the sermon. Tell at least a couple of relevant stories, but regarding the stories be careful of the following:
 - Don't tell too many stories.
 - Keep the stories as short, succinct, and to-the-point as possible.
 - Make sure the people can clearly understand how the main point of each story relates to the point to which it applies in the sermon.
 - Apply at least one point in the sermon to the needs of most adults in the congregation; specify for them what that point is and what it means for their lives.
- Adults should be encouraged to give during the offering. Adults, together with the rest of the congregation, can bring their offering to baskets or plates on the communion table or elsewhere in the apse.
- Give the whole congregation, adults included, the opportunity to participate by using antiphonal and responsive readings for the Bible lesson.

- Participating in the sacraments involves adults and employs all five senses.
 - Adults can serve as greeters prior to and following the worship service; those who are parents, can do so together with their children of all ages. Greeting in this manner sends a subtle but strong message that everyone else in these age ranges is warmly welcome in the worship service.
 - Reciting a confession of faith, such as the Apostles' Creed, and a commitment to obey the Lord's commands, directly engages adults in an edifying experience and an important witness to any visitors who may not be Christians.
 - Adults who want to make a confession of faith do so when joining the church, and they can do so as well on other occasions as a testimony to God's current work in their lives, enabling others to sense how God is active in his people's minds, hearts, and daily experiences.
 - Those who have had an especially significant experience in their faith can be allowed to share it with the congregation as part of their responding to God's Word or after the service followed by a congregational expression of thanksgiving to God.
- c. After you've constructed the long list produced by this group activity, be sure to emphasize that they don't have to do all these things at once, or even every one of them. Tell them to not be overwhelmed; do just one, two, or as many as they can at a time and the rest as they have resources for doing in the future. Mention that they should involve others also to help implement the ideas they select, so they don't have to do all the work themselves.
- d. **Be sure to point out that the worship service does not have to be, nor should it be, made into a fun activity or made simplistic in an attempt to accommodate it to children and youth. The younger ones can understand much, and they will grow in their understanding as they worship regularly over the years with their parents and other adults in God's covenant community.**
- e. Next ask the group, "While we were constructing this list of what can be done in our worship services to engage all ages in God's worship, is there anything else anyone has thought of that we could add to the list?"

Action Plan Steps for Lesson Six

4. For the remaining time in this session, continue to construct your Action Plans. First individually, then in your groups of four, reflect on these questions. Write them on the flipchart, chalkboard, overhead, or other projection device you use. Add any other questions that may be helpful.
- a. What changes should I implement in my church back home
 - 1) To engage children in corporate worship?
 - 2) To engage teenagers in corporate worship?

- 3) To engage adults in corporate worship?
 - b. Which changes should I implement first?
5. Whenever we make changes, including and especially in worship services, some and often many people become upset. In our next lesson we'll examine Biblical principles for avoiding and overcoming conflict when making changes, especially in application to worship planning.
6. Closing prayer