

# WORSHIPPING...WITH CHILDREN?

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## WORSHIP IN THE BIBLE

The traditional style of worship that many churches follow today is very different from the patterns of worship we see in the Bible. Adam and Eve walked and talked with God in a garden, surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells of nature. Abraham worshipped outside, building altars and burning sacrifices. The children of Israel worshipped in a woven and embroidered tabernacle, with sights, sounds, smells, feasts, and various activities that involved the children. Jesus sat outside and stood in boats as he told the people short stories about every day life that children understood too, such as lost sheep, wedding feasts, and planting seeds. While the children listened to him they probably picked wild flowers, counted sheep and chased butterflies. They never sat still for an hour or so on an adult-sized seat that made their legs ache.

## JESUS' THEOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

It is important to explore Jesus' theology of childhood, because he has some profound teaching about the role of children in his kingdom. Through Matthew's narrative we read some of his most powerful statements about the position of the children in his kingdom:

'At about the same time, the disciples came to Jesus asking, "Who gets the highest rank in God's kingdom?"

'For an answer Jesus called over a child, whom he stood in the middle of the room, and said, "I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom. What's more, when you receive the childlike on my account, it's the same as receiving me.

"But if you give them a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you'll soon wish you hadn't. You'd be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck. Doom to the world for giving these God-believing children a hard time! Hard times are inevitable, but you don't have to make it worse - and it's doomsday to you if you do.'" Matthew 18:1-7, The Message.

These verses help us to understand the importance of children in God's kingdom:

- Children are vitally important in the Christian community. They are central to the life of God's kingdom, not peripheral to it.
- Jesus does not tell children to be more like grown ups – he tells grown ups to be more like children – in their simplicity of their faith, their wonder, and their love.
- It is important to Jesus that children feel totally welcome in his presence. When we welcome children into worship, and help them to feel special and at ease, we're also welcoming God into our presence.
- Adults need the humility to learn about God's kingdom from the children in their congregation. They need to think more simply about God, and to trust him completely and uncomplicatedly.

- Jesus feels angry when children have experiences that push them away from God's presence. So we need to ensure that nothing in our worship experience comes between the children and their relationship with Jesus.

## THE CHILD'S REALITY

Are the children central to your church, or on the very edges of your church? How welcome do they feel when they step inside your church each week? What are they learning about Jesus by the way the adults in your church interact with them? What was their experience of church last week? What would your church have to do differently to put the children in the centre of your church? What difference might it make to the children's relationship with God, and their salvation, if you did?

## A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE?

Every church service is an amazing evangelistic opportunity. Every week our worship can help children grow their relationship with God, or it can make them feel that God doesn't care about children, that he is too complex for them to understand, or that he is too perfect and organized for their spontaneity, energy, and unpredictability. How does it change the way we worship as a community when we see every church service as an evangelistic event for our own children?

Whenever you are planning a service, or organizing any activity in your church, think about the children. Try placing them in the middle of your plans and look at what you do through their eyes. Will they feel comfortable, happy and accepted? What will they learn about God's love for them? Will they learn that children are the most important people in your church? Will this worship service or church activity bring them one step closer to accepting Jesus as their personal Savior, or one step further away?

## INVOLVING CHILDREN IN WORSHIP SERVICES

Once we start to think outside the box of our traditional worship services we can find simple and creative ways to involve children in our worship services. The kind of involvement we need to encourage is not simply listening to a children's story, or helping to collect the offering. These are helpful, but not as useful for nurturing their spiritual development as active involvement that invites them to be thoughtfully reflective, to pray, to be filled with wonder and gratitude, to listen to the Holy Spirit, and to use their creative gifts.

## HOW CAN YOU INCREASE THE INVOLVEMENT OF CHILDREN IN YOUR WORSHIP SERVICES?

- Pray – God wants to help you create the kind of worship experiences that will win children's hearts. Ask him to inspire you with the best ways to reach the children in your church through your worship.
- Reflect – Think about your topic from the perspective of the child you drew. Which aspects of your topic are relevant to children? What difference will this worship service make to their relationship with God?
- Wonder – How can you adapt your message, or at least one aspect of the worship, so that children will find the service memorable and enjoyable?

- Plan ahead – Involving children takes extra time and thought. Planning ahead makes it easier to find the resources you need, and it can give you the time to prepare a child to participate in a way that nurtures their spiritual development.
- Be flexible – Involving children in worship isn't always neat and tidy! Be prepared for the unexpected and know how to respond. The most important thing is to keep the child safe, physically, spiritually and emotionally. So don't blame or shame a child who doesn't get it quite right.
- Invite feedback – Ask the children what they liked best about the worship service so you can do more of the things they enjoy.
- Celebrate their gifts and strengths and use them in your worship.
- Help the children to share God's love by serving others.
- Keep going. Gather a supportive team to help you, read books about all-age worship, search the Internet, and don't give up. You're planting seeds that may take time to grow.

## PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR INVOLVING CHILDREN IN CHURCH WORSHIP

### SONGS AND MUSIC

Churches that involve children often choose to sing one child-friendly song each week. Provide a selection of good quality percussion instruments so the children can enjoy praising God.

### SCRIPTURE READING

Plan your scriptures several weeks ahead so that a small group of children can practice and read the Bible verses as a voice choir, or as a narrative. Or invite one child to work with an adult mentor. They can study the scripture together to help the child understand what they are reading. Maybe they can find objects to illustrate the Bible passage, or design a creative PowerPoint presentation, or dress as a Bible character to present the scripture.

### PRAYER

Make space for children to bring their thanks, praises, prayer requests and answers to prayer. Let them see that their prayer concerns are important to you. Pair them with a trusted adult so they can share a prayer request with each other every week. Ask a family to offer the main prayer and involve each of their children in different aspects of the prayer. Invite children to bring something to church that represents what they want to thank God for, and to place it on a special display table at the side of the platform.

### OFFERING

Children can decorate special envelopes to collect the offering. Or hand children 'Thank You!' slips and ask them to write a thank you note to God for something special that has happened during the week. These can be collected with the offering and several can be chosen to read during the offering prayer. The thank you slips can be arranged on a bulletin board for people to read after the service.

## SERMON

Try telling the children's story as part of the sermon, to keep their attention. Show appropriate video clips that help children to understand the message of the sermon, such as the ones found on [www.ignitermedia.com](http://www.ignitermedia.com). Involve them in physical illustrations and mini experiments. Or give them something quiet and meaningful to do during the sermon, such as inviting them to make posters that tell the world about God's love. Display the posters immediately after the service.

## BENEDICTION

After a sermon on the theme of the lost sheep, the congregation made a circle around the children. They blessed them and promised to look after them, like good shepherds. Children could also hand out blessing cards that they have decorated. The greeters at the door can place their hands on each child as they leave, and say a short blessing or prayer over them.

## AFTER THE SERVICE

Try organizing a creative, spiritual activity for families to enjoy after church. After a service about heaven we drew a road map of the heavenly city – basically three gold streets running north-south and three running east-west to give us 12 gates. Then we provided the families with folded cardstock houses and plenty of glue and sparkly craft materials. They worked together to create heavenly mansions and placed them on the shiny streets.

## CREATIVITY

Create opportunities for children to work alongside experienced adults to make banners, posters, props, displays, decorated offering envelopes, program cover designs, etc. Remember that the process of wondering, thinking and creating is much more important to the child's spiritual development than the quality of the end product.

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THESE ARE JUST A HANDFUL OF SUGGESTIONS. FIND MORE IDEAS, RESOURCES AND WEBSITES FOR INVOLVING CHILDREN IN YOUR WORSHIP SERVICES AT:

[WWW.MINISTRYMAGAZINE.ORG/ARCHIVE/2009/05/SIMPLY-CREATIVE](http://WWW.MINISTRYMAGAZINE.ORG/ARCHIVE/2009/05/SIMPLY-CREATIVE)

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**KAREN HOLFORD**

**FAMILY MINISTRIES DIRECTOR TED**