

LCMS

Worship Library

Title: Children in Worship - Moving Beyond Cheerios and Crayons

Category: Youth in Worship

At its 1998 convention, The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod designated 2001 as "The Year of the Child." This article, written by the Rev. Jon Vieker, former assistant director for the LCMS Commission on Worship, considers the latest research being conducted at Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois, on children in worship, and makes some helpful applications.

The scene is so familiar. Parents, children, the Divine Service, and all the "accessories" that come along for the ride—the children's bulletins, the scraps of "scribble paper," the Cheerios, and the crayons. Each week, we parents go to great lengths to keep our children occupied during the worship hour. We know how our children, especially the younger ones, can become when they are bored or ignored, and we really don't want to see that in public.

But is there something beyond merely keeping our children occupied for the time being? Is there some way to move in the Divine Service "beyond Cheerios and crayons"?

Three Key Factors

Recently, the "experts" have been asking just those kinds of questions. Drs. Shirley K. Morgenthaler, the late Peter M. Becker, and Gary L. Bertels of Concordia University, River Forest, have published a book titled: *Children in Worship: Lessons from Research (CIW)*. Associated with Concordia's Center for the Study of Children's Ethical Development, their book is a summary of recent research they conducted among 100 Lutheran congregations examining "key aspects of worship in Lutheran churches from the 'eyes of a child.'" (*CIW*, 3). Basing its presuppositions on an educational model developed by John H. Westerhoff, the study was organized around three basic factors concerning children and worship:

- environmental context
- ritual and predictability
- intentional enculturation

Environmental Context

By "environmental context," *CIW* took a long look at the physical settings in which worship is conducted. In other words, how do the nave and chancel areas facilitate a meaningful worship experience for children?

One big area to consider here is the art work and pictures present in the worship area. At home, we decorate our children's rooms in the brightest of colors. We buy them books with vivid colors and memorable images. Children (especially younger children) love color and pictures—looking at them and drawing them. How can the color and images of the church link up with this natural affinity in our children?

What about the beautiful stained glass in many of our sanctuaries? Stained glass, if suitably designed, can provide wonderful pictures to remind children, for instance, of Jesus the Good Shepherd, of the Holy Trinity, of their Baptism, of various Bible stories, etc. What about other pictures and graphic art that may be hung in the sanctuary—perhaps an oil painting or print of Jesus and little children near the baptismal font? What about the colors of the paraments that change during the seasons of the church year? These are often in vivid colors which can provide rich meaning to us and to our children. Banners of all sorts for the various seasons can also helpfully portray the theme of the day or season for children to understand.

What about candles that are lit and extinguished in the service, especially the Paschal Candle for Holy Baptism? Children are fascinated with fire (sometimes, too fascinated!). What about the crosses—the cross on the altar, the processional cross, and the numerous other places where crosses show up (perhaps even a church built in a cruciform shape). All of these hold high the pivot point of all salvation history: Christ and him crucified.

The list could go on. The next time you enter your own church building, try looking at the art displayed there through the eyes of a child. Is there a feast for your children's eyes to behold and consider?

A second topic under the environmental context of worship concerns logistics. For example, many congregations reserve pews in the *back* of the sanctuary for families with small children. But is that really the best place for children to sit? Think about it. Is it no wonder that our children often tune out what's going on in church? Try slumping down in your pew to their eye level and see what it's like to try and pay attention!

How can you as an adult make what's going on in front more visible for your children? Moving them (and yourself) up to the front might be one way. Another would be for the congregation to provide "booster seats" for smaller children like they do in restaurants. Try sitting up front next Sunday and see whether it makes a difference!

Ritual and Predictability

Think of your child's birthday party. Perhaps, your little nine-year-old has chosen to invite some friends over for a party and sleep-over. For the party, Mom and Dad put on the whole schmeer—a piñata full of candy, a cake with candles and singing "Happy Birthday," the opening of presents, the thank-yous and hugs, and so forth. Everyone has a marvelous time!

But here's a ridiculous question: how would it go over if, when your child came to you with the idea of a party, you would say instead: "No, honey, we don't think so. We'd rather just write you a check for the cost of the party and the presents and then congratulate you instead with a simple handshake." How would that go over? Horribly, of course! It would have told your little girl that Mom and Dad didn't care very much about her turning nine and, consequently, that she wasn't very important to them.

What's the point? One big reason we follow rituals—like the ritual of a birthday party with its cake and candles and song—is because *rituals tell us that something very important is going on*. Rituals communicate that what's being done is out of the ordinary and is, therefore, worthy of a special ceremony.

But rituals also create an environment of predictability. Is there anyone who doesn't know what to do next when they see someone walking into the room with a cake full of candles? The simple fact of the matter is that we all learn by repetition and predictability. And it's even biblical. When the Lord gave the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel, he declared: "These words I give you today are to be upon your hearts. *Impress* them on your children" (Deut. 6:6—7a). The literal meaning of the Hebrew word

here involves "repetition." "*Repeat* these words upon your children . . ." if you will. And isn't that exactly how it works for our children in the Divine Service? In *Children in Worship* (p. 53), Shirley Morgenthaler concludes:

For children, the opportunity to participate in prayers by folding hands and kneeling is a powerful point of entry into liturgy. So, too, the exchange of peace and making the sign of the cross. These acts become children's early entry into the liturgy of the Church. For many children, the presence of familiar verses and responses sung by the congregation is an opportunity for participation. For the non-reading child, the opportunity to participate in liturgy is solely dependent on the presence of those predictable elements.

Intentional Enculturation

This is a scholarly way of saying that parents and pastors should intentionally plan worship with children in mind. But "What does this mean?" is the standard Lutheran question.

Carl Schalk, Distinguished Professor of Music Emeritus from Concordia, River Forest, has also written a marvelous little book titled, *First Person Singular: Reflections on Worship, Liturgy, and Children*. In it he describes how the buzz word "inter-generational worship" can be misapplied:

There is a danger in allowing "intergenerational worship" to become simply another slogan, yet another gimmick, complete with artificial and contrived "participation" in worship. One is beginning to see patently pretentious and transparently self-conscious attempts to involve different generations in worship ("Now let's have all the grandfathers stand up . . .") most of which are not only awkward and inappropriate, but occasionally offensive, and often downright destructive of what the liturgy is all about. At their best [however,] Christians have always encouraged and fostered inter-generational worship. *We called it going to church together*. Father and mother, children—and if grandparents lived nearby, they joined the family—sitting together in the pews. Children learned from watching their parents participate in worship, they learned what to do, how to conduct themselves, what worship was about . . . *We called it family devotions*. Before or after the evening meal, each father and mother—grandfather and grandmother if they were present—led in the singing of a hymn, a reading from scripture and a brief devotion, concluding with a short prayer. Children learned to worship as their parents, grandparents, and older siblings provided examples and models (pp. 25—26).

Here Schalk is primarily speaking to parents: bring your children to church from a very young age, he is saying, and show them by example how to worship. Teach them at home—with simple family devotions—that your worship goes on throughout the week and not just on Sunday mornings. The nitty-gritty "how-tos" of children in worship do not have universal answers and simple solutions. It is definitely not easy work. But then, the really worthwhile things in life rarely are!

Beyond Cheerios and Crayons

So is there a place for Cheerios and crayons? Most certainly there is—and even for "scribble paper" and children's bulletins. But there is so much more that can be done to lead our children into the riches of the Divine Service. This calls for parents, pastors, and congregational leaders to take a proactive role in seeing that this happens in their own parishes and homes.

Further Resources

LCMS Worship: "Reflections on Children's Sermons/Messages."

Available at the following link, this document suggests ways to make children's sermons truly helpful and relevant to children. lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm@id=971

Shirley K. Morgenthaler, Peter M. Becker, and Gary L. Bertels, *Children in Worship: Lessons from Research*. Pillars Press of Concordia University, River Forest (708-209-3173).

There is much to learn from this important book, but take a look particularly at the "Questions to Consider" on pages 59—60.

Carl Schalk, *First Person Singular: Reflections on Worship, Liturgy and Children*, MorningStar 90-26 (800-647-2117), \$15.00.

Drawn from years of practical experience as a church musician, this book contains Dr. Schalk's observations on current worship practices collected from articles written for *Lutheran Education*.

Julie Stiegemeyer, *Things I See in Church*, CPH 562227 (800-325-3040), \$2.00.

For children 2-5, this "bring along" book allows children to follow along and better understand what is happening in church. Colorful illustrations and simple language.

Christopher I. Thoma, *Kids in the Divine Service*. LCMS Worship. \$12.95.

This set of 52 reproducible bulletin inserts invites children and parents to explore the various parts of the liturgy and their chancel surroundings. Find out more about this resource at: lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=451

Resources published after the original printing of this article:

Pam Nielsen, *Behold the Lamb: An Introduction to Christian Symbolism*, CPH 223104 (800-325-3040), \$9.49.

One of a series of three books for instruction for children about the life of the church, but is also an excellent resource for teens and adults. *Behold the Lamb* is an excellent resource instruction about the what and why of Christian symbols.

Heath Curtis, *Ordering Our Days in His Peace*, CPH 223103 (800-325-3040), \$9.49.

An additional book in the series with instruction on the life of the church – this one leads the reader through an understanding about the different "times" of the church year.

Scot Kinnaman, *Worshiping with the Angels and Archangels*, CPH 223094 (800-325-3040), \$9.49.

This book in the series helps the reader/child to understand the significance of the Divine Service with engaging pictures and simple explanations.

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