

MentorNet #02

What to Do with Children During Worship?

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I hear this question more than any other from people who start new churches or small groups, but never from a non-Westerner. The solution is fourfold. We apply a more biblical approach to four Western traditions, for children's participation, Bible exposition, varying methods and harmonizing people of different ages.

1. Let children participate, more than simply hearing a 'children's sermon.'

Anne Thiessen (T&M Training, tribal, Ometepeq, Mexico) shared her creative practice. "We want the children to participate, so we meet together before the worship with the kids and practice acting out either the Old Testament or New Testament reading (whichever is more story-like). We learn a song together and a verse for them to share, too, which we practice over time so that the kids really get them. During the service the kids act out the reading, which, before, had often been poorly read and even more poorly understood by the illiterate tribal people. The adults have a visual aid; the kids enjoy participation that doesn't require much planning.

"The group gets used to allowing things that are enjoyable. Drama and music are introduced in a non-threatening way. If adults watch the rehearsal, so much the better. It means more prompters and better understanding. It's kind of fun. I let the older kids take more and more responsibility for this. I help them to pick out from the Bible passages the dialogue for the younger children to speak or act out, and to summarize the story in kid-sized words. Adults, young people and children who've never helped lead in a church before now jump in and put their whole heart into it, learning as they grow. It's amazingly freeing."

2. Teach the Word the way Paul did.

Good Bible exposition seeks lays the legal and historical foundation for abstract doctrinal teaching. Anne's practice raised the question, "What do we do if the Bible text does not lend itself to dramatization, such as the book of Romans." The answer lies in Romans itself. Good Bible exposition builds on historical passages that illustrate or give the legal basis for an abstract doctrinal passage, as Paul did in Romans. He assumed that his readers knew the OT stories of Adam, Abraham, Moses and the law, and referred to them constantly. Christianity (and OT Judaism) is unique among religions in that its doctrines grow out of the great redemptive events of history. All other religions started with some dreamer's philosophical musings on metaphysics and ethics. But Christian doctrines resulted from inspired consideration of historical, concrete, redemptive events--creation, the fall, the flood, the pact with Abraham, slavery and deliverance from Egypt, the Law, its violation, etc.

An example is the 'trial by fire' before Jesus' judgment seat (1 Cor. 3:11-15) to make sure we don't sneak evil contraband into heaven. We find the legal and historical basis in Num. 31; Moses confronted the victorious soldiers who were bringing illegal booty into the holy camp. They had to build a fire and pass the objects through it. What was purified by fire could enter; silver idols were melted down. A purely doctrinal New Testament text will have a historical basis. We can link it to an Old Testament passage or earlier New Testament event that gives its prophetic or legal basis, which kids and adults can act out. We rob people of a great treasure, not to mention lots of fun, if we fail to reenact these foundations when we teach the Word.

I thought this all applied well to house churches and shared it on the network ntcp@homechurch.org. Responses varied from mild skepticism to "Them's good groceries!" When teachers fail to plan such participation, it may be laziness or ignorance of the need to build relationships while teaching. A later response from Anne Thiessen adds, "If the passages for the day (Psalm, OT, NT) lack drama, I simply find something related. Today we studied prayer and how God provides for us, so we did Elijah and the ravens. A small girl was a raven with a piece of tortilla in her 'beak.' A boy was the prophet sitting next to the brook (a bowl of water--being in a house makes it easy to find props). An adult spoke the Lord's

words telling him to go find a widow. Last week we read Psalm 23, so we did the parable of the lost sheep. The poor lamb bleated loudly and pitifully in the next room during the first part of the service. Then the kids went with the ‘shepherd’ to find it. It was the high point of the service. Another time they slew a lamb on the altar before Communion. Made me realize how dramatic the Lord’s Supper is.”

3. Vary the way you present a passage.

Jesus avoided using only one method. He used conversation, lecture, parables, object lessons, questions and a whip. You can illustrate slaying a lamb in Old Testament worship with no spoken lines. Someone enters pretending to be pulling on a rope; at the other end comes a ‘lamb’ on hands and knees, bleating. You ask the ‘worshipper’ to lay hands on its head (to confess sins) then ‘priests’ place it on the altar and slit its throat. An adult describes the blood spattering all over them, the noise, smell, flies and fire. For worship this is shocking and repugnant--because our sins are shocking and repugnant to God. Sometimes people simply act out a truth silently, other times they read lines.

For example, you might teach from Romans 5 the grace that abounds for many through the obedience of the final Adam. Paul compares the two Adams, so reenact Adam and Eve’s fall. Don’t make it an elaborate production, it needs not be long and it’s not to entertain or display acting ability. Participants simply read (and add the appropriate actions) the words of Adam, Eve, the voice of God, the serpent and the narrator. Tiny children portray animals as Adam names them. If you want a moment of fun, let the most serious man in your church—the last person people would expect--do the serpent. When he appears he hisses at the audience. If people laugh, he stares them into silence, hissing with an intent sneer. Let young people teach the passage to younger people and practice the reenactment well ahead of time. Help people to disciple their families and younger friends. Make it easy for them, model it and praise their efforts publicly.

4. Mix people of different ages.

Dramatized sermons make a greater impact if adults also participate. It edifies more people when the older kids prepare and the younger and disciple them in the process. Children of all ages and cultures have a natural desire to receive attention from older children. It’s a crime to always segregate them by age. Sometimes, yes, it’s normal for them to gather with peers, but not exclusively. That impairs their ability to relate normally. A young people’s advisor wanted two boys to leave the group because they always made noise and distracted the rest. I felt that they were simply bursting with energy and creativity, so I asked them to start a new group and disciple younger children. I helped them plan and gave them the tools for discipling. They all grew as a result.

Galen Currah observes from Africa and Asia, “In most human societies, children are considered to be family and society members in training, and are made a part of most social events. Unacceptable behavior is corrected immediately by any member of the family or whoever attends an event. Those societies also hold **purely** cultural events **to** mark every child’s transition into adulthood with new behavioral expectations. The industrialization of Western societies required workers (not people) and the secularization of education imposed artificial grading and graduation, effectively tearing apart families and delaying adult behavior. If Christians are to **practice a godly** counter-culture, then we must move towards what God made us to be.”

If you would like a list of suggestions for getting people of all ages to participate in Bible readings or short dramatizations, we will work one up if enough request it. Simply reply: **Bible Drama**.

To find mentoring tools and sites, visit <<http://www.MentorAndMultiply.com>>.

We invite those who use Train & Multiply™ to write to George Patterson at <GPatterson@cvmail.net>.

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