

# What Congregations Practicing Intergenerational Worship Have In Common

## What is “intergenerational worship”?

“Intergenerational worship” or “worship for all ages” is worship that seeks to equally value people of all ages. These are services that intentionally consider the needs of diverse ages in worship and the accessibility of full participation of different generations. While many churches offer “child-friendly worship” or “family services,” churches practicing intergenerational worship aim to better incorporate all the generations into the entire worship service, not just parents or children.

## Six Traits of Congregations Practicing Worship for All Ages

### 1. Intentionality

There are many churches in which a diverse age span of individuals is present for the entire service. I would term this multi-generational worship, worship in which many generations are present together. Churches practicing intergenerational worship **intentionally** consider how accessible their worship service is for different generations.

In many congregations, this goes beyond exploring a children/adult generational divide to wondering how the silent generation, baby boomers, generation x, and millennials as distinctive generations can be invited to more full participation in worship.

### 2. Full Participation

In some churches, a few leaders actively facilitate worship while the congregation is relatively passive. Churches practicing intergenerational worship emphasize the **full participation** of all worshipers. These churches look for ways to extend leadership invitations to as many people as possible and are deliberate about including a variety of generations.

Encouraging full participation in worship might include using images or props during the sermon so that people can participate through sight and sound. It might include creative presentations of scripture such as Biblical storytelling or skits. It might include intentional times of quiet marked by a bell or inviting people to play percussion instruments during some songs.

### 3. The Sound Factor

Beyond the organ, piano, handbells, or singing voices, church is filled **with the sound of the gathered body**. From sneezes and coughs to dropped hymnals, churches practicing intergenerational worship are no different than any other group gathering. At any given service you might hear the beeping of someone's hearing aid running out of batteries, the whoosh of an oxygen tank as someone breathes, or the clunk of a kneeler falling down, but what is almost certain is that you will hear the sound of children.

Whether it is laughter, crying, "whispers," shuffling paper, or dropping crayons, it is hard not to notice the presence of children in worship. Churches practicing intergenerational worship acknowledge that this is a challenge and remind themselves that the gift of being together in worship outweighs the inconvenience of sounds that might be distracting.

### 4. Commitment of Time

In the Episcopal context (and probably many others) time spent on liturgical preparation can vary widely from congregation to congregation. Churches practicing intergenerational worship **commit a significant amount of time** preparing for worship.

For some, this time might be spent in training worship leaders from acolytes to lay readers, chalice bearers, intercessors, and ushers so that leadership can be shared work. For some, this time might be spent in sermon writing so that diverse ages can connect with the preaching. For others, this time might be spent in intergenerational relationship building outside of worship so that the Body of Christ can gather as a more intentional family in liturgy.

### 5. Reflection & Responsiveness

In congregations practicing worship for all ages, leaders create opportunities for worshipers to articulate what they noticed and to be heard by the community. The emphasis is on "noticing" and "wondering" rather than expressing personal likes and dislikes. This **reflection** can take place in many ways. Some congregations gather for fifteen minutes

weekly right after worship. Some offer a reflection gathering monthly. Some invite reflections in a weekly email.

No matter the format, these occasions for reflection give church leaders a chance to hear the experience of people in the pews and give people in the pews a chance to be heard. **Responsiveness** to these reflections takes the form of active listening and joint curiosity rather than reactivity. The reflections provide opportunities to be attentive to where the Spirit is moving during worship and what is distracting people from encountering God.

## 6. Flexibility

There are many churches in which worship is led by a small number of highly trained individuals. In my experience liturgy tends to feel highly polished and orderly in these places. In churches practicing intergenerational worship, liturgy requires substantially more **flexibility** from both the leaders and the congregation.

When the work of leadership is shared across the age spectrum and there is an emphasis on the full participation of worshipers, it is inevitable that something will not go “as planned.” Someone will read the wrong lesson, forget to take up the offering, spill the wine, or be running into church half vested at the last minute. Sometimes these small blunders are funny, sometimes embarrassing, and sometimes distracting. But the end result seems theologically sound: there is a sense that worshiping God is about presence and togetherness, not perfection.

## Why It Matters

I care about more congregations adopting practices of worship for all ages because I believe that we belong to each other. We belong to each other as children of God. The image of God resides in each of us our whole lives long. We do not take on the image when we turn 13 or 18 or 21. And we do not lose the image when we cross “over the hill” or when our memory begins to fail.

When we gather together as younger and older images of the Creator, there is a wholeness that would not otherwise be. As Paul writes, “the body does not consist of one member but of many” and we have need of all the members in the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:14). We have innate value to the community even when we do not “contribute” anything visible in worship.

Furthermore, we have gifts to share with each other. Each generation of our lives offers us

fresh insight, unique ways of connecting with God, and new abilities that we can share with the community. Every generation has something to offer. Substantial effort should be made to include everyone in the full worship service - both those who cannot yet bring themselves to church and those who can no longer do so.

The weekly celebration of Holy Eucharist is our primary work as church. At its best, we enact the world as it should be through liturgy and this experience informs the work of the rest of our lives. If we claim that worship is the most important thing we do together as Christians, how can we justify leaving anyone out?

*Sarah Bentley Allred is an MDiv. student at Virginia Theological Seminary. Previously, Sarah served for four years as Director of Children’s and Youth Ministries at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in High Point, North Carolina. She loves local coffee shops, board games, the beach, and exploring new places with her husband, Richard, and their dog, Grace.*

**Related Post**



Peace Out: Rethinking ‘Passing the Peace’...



Illuminated Cards to Teach the Liturgy



9 Ways to Create Family Worship Services



A Church Activity for All Ages: Making Social Medi...