

A Case Study for Gradual Change

The following case study explores possible methods of addressing one congregation's obstacles to intergenerational worship and creating systemic change. After reading it, brainstorm as a group what approaches might be helpful for leading change in your congregation.

When St. John's began seven years ago, the church family intentionally chose to keep their children with them throughout the entire liturgy, except the homily when the children are blessed and dismissed for an age-appropriate lesson. As the congregations has grown and shifted over the years, many families have chosen to make St. John's their church home in part because of this emphasis on intergenerational worship. Other families, however, stay for other parts of the community or worship, and the comply with the non-traditional worship style by choosing to quietly occupy their children during worship rather than worship alongside them.

From the back of the sanctuary on Sunday morning, a person can observe three groups of children and families:

First, there are families with children who are engaged in the service through prayer, song, and sometimes service. Sarah and Hannah serve the chalice at Communion; Witt runs the slides on a monthly basis; Anna visits the prayer team regularly with specific prayer requests for herself, her friends, and needs around the world. These children are far from perfect and often engage in shenanigans outside of worship, but they voluntarily participate in corporate worship.

Next, there are families who are actively working to teach their children how to join in corporate worship: Four-year-old Benjamin is always a hair behind on The Lord's Prayer, but he's excited to say it aloud. Seven-year-old Jake wanders into the aisle for a better view of the Eucharist blessing and excitedly waves to friends as they pass his row for communion. Five-year-old Olivia brings stuffed animals each week to hear about Jesus even if she has difficulty staying in a chair for longer than a minute or two. A dozen children become restless at the closing benediction, knowing that as soon as the last two sentences are uttered, they're invited forward to lead us in celebration and dancing. These children are learning how to worship, and watching them learn the rhythms of our community is a joy and privilege. They will appropriately outgrow some of their behavior, but the congregation hopes that other young brothers and sisters will be learning in their stead.

Finally, there are children who come equipped with their LEGO projects, Barbie dolls, and sticker-books, ready to quietly distract themselves while the adults sing and pray. They leave

the toys in their seats for the children's lesson or Communion, but they have come to amuse themselves rather than worship. As these children grow older, they often find a phone to play with, further disengaging. Although St. John's has dozens of children from ages three to twelve actively engaging in the service, somehow a significant number of children are more preoccupied with their toys than the corporate worship of the rest of the church family, including many of their peers.

Most of the families in this final group sit near the back of the Sanctuary, so the other families near them are taking similar approaches. Sometimes leaders see a child leave her seat and go join another child playing with an interesting toy. The proximity to the entrance of the room also sets the tone for others, including visitors who are picking up what worship with children looks like in our congregation. The level of disengagement from the service does not necessarily correlate with learning disabilities or attention spans. One leader who teaches every child in the congregation on a regular basis, notes that the children with learning differences, distractibility, and high-energy are often well-engaged with the service.

A Clear Vision

St. John's mission statement includes the desire that every person know and love God through worship, and commits to authenticity, community, discipleship and service. Because the church already welcomes children in our congregational worship time, children are present and familiar with our congregation's rhythms. For some children, this is invitation enough to participate. Others need to be invited and equipped more specifically to participate in a more clearly articulated vision augmented with specific vital behaviors.

In regards to worship and child participation, it is important to distinguish between facilitating vital behaviors and behaviorism, or mandated worship activities. Part of respecting children as human beings means appreciating their process of spiritual formation. Adults may invite children's participation in worship, but children should never be coerced through punishment or shame. Families often need to place boundaries when teaching their children appropriate behavior for public (e.g. "Please don't kick the back of the pew.", "Let's talk softly, so we don't distract people who are praying.", or "When someone new introduces herself, please greet her and share your name."), but general decorum should not be confused with worship or spiritual formation.

Three Key Demographics

Systemic change at St. John's will affect and involve three groups of people: children, ministry leaders, and parents. While all three groups of people will be involved in the change, they will perceive and participate in the change differently, and they will need different resources to achieve a common vision.

Children are the first and strongest allies in the effort to initiate change in our congregation's understanding of children's participation in worship. Because their brains are still developing and their habits are malleable, children are able to adapt to new ideas, and many of them are used to trying new activities through school and extra-curricular activities. Most young children at St. John's have grown up in the church and lack another context for comparison. While their parents might believe that children need entertainment, distraction, or flashy programs, the children in our church family lack these expectations. Additionally, the children's ministry director interacts more with children than either of the other demographics because she teaches them regularly. With the amount of time she spends with them, she can help lead them gently into the changes.

A small majority of children at St. John's already regularly engage in worship services, and of those who participate, about half are identified by professionals in school and therapy settings as high-need, including children with sensory-processing disorder, reactive-attachment disorder, dyslexia, ADHD and high-impulsivity. Some of these children come from traditional family backgrounds, but they also include children adopted internationally or through foster care, children from the community who attend with a non-parent adult, and children from single-parent homes or blended families. Rather than prevent them from engaging, these unique needs seem to propel their parents and our greater church family to intentionally seek to include them in worship.

Staff and worship leaders who plan the service hold the personal power to cast a vision and shape the experience of adults and children during our worship service. They have the unique ability to create opportunities for children to engage in our worship service, and they already dedicate time and energy to crafting beautiful and intentional times of corporate worship for our community. Three of the staff members have children at home under the age of eleven and understand first-hand the task of inviting children into congregational worship on a weekly basis.

Finally, as the primary authority figures and influences in children's lives, parents are able to model and encourage their own children to participate in our worship services, knowing their child's personality, needs, and abilities. Members of St. John's quickly identify authenticity, approachability, and lay involvement as key reasons they choose to join the church family. Over eighty-percent of our regular adult attenders and members volunteer and serve in some capacity. Active involvement in worship and church ministries characterizes the church culture, making it easier to ask for parent engagement with children with a degree of expectancy.

Invitations and Hospitality

Having taken into account theological, philosophical, psychological, and structural resources, the church proposed three invitations and three forms of hospitality to enable children, staff, and parents to hear, affirm, and engage the vision of all children participating as members of our church community, seeking to know and love God fully. The leaders and parents of St. John's must work together to extend hospitality to the children learning how to worship with them, and in doing so, they suspect they will also find that they have created an environment more hospitable to others on the margins. The three invitations include:

- The staff and worship team will write, share, and post online a message and video directly to children, affirming their presence and participation in our worship community.
- The worship resources and space will acknowledge and accommodate the size and abilities of children, and resourcing tools will be readily accessible to the children themselves.
- Families will be given a story-based guide to Sunday worship at St. John's so that parents and children can share a common language around worship, allowing children the ability to understand how and why we invite their participation and providing them with a tool to share about their own journey of spiritual formation.

A Verbal Invitation

The verbal invitation from the staff and worship leaders to children prompts slow and deliberate thinking from the staff about how they plan to fulfill their commitment to children on a weekly basis, sets a positive, thoughtful tone for their interaction with children, and utilizes the social power of visible leaders to affirm to the whole community the importance of the presence of children in the service.

By considering and developing their own commitment to children, those who lead the services will need to consider more fully how they plan to engage children. The common approach of church staff members to children exemplifies reactionary, surface level thinking rather than the deep thinking. While they may readily affirm the joy of children's presence, engaging children in worship takes intentionality. They must consider the needs and gifts of the unique children present and evaluate and adapt their worship planning process in reference to the needs and gifts of the child participants.

A statement and video recording set the tone for the unforeseen adaptations the worship leaders will need to make in order to respond to the varying needs of children and the congregation as a whole. A clear vision allows adaptation to take place because the end goal always hovers ahead of the level of current achievement. A common thread in successful visions is an established core identity that can sustain long-term change. An invitational statement recorded through video allows visible leaders to similarly share their values and cast a long-term vision, creating space for adaptation and organic growth.

By recording their verbal commitment through a video posted on the website, children will have a visible, accessible, and repeatable positive association with people they see on a regular basis but spend little time interacting with directly. A video invitation can set a kind, eager tone that reassures children and parents that people in leadership truly welcome their presence and participation. By seeing and hearing the enthusiasm of church leaders for the presence and participation of children in the service, children will feel more welcome and parents put at-ease as they learn how to participate in worship together.

Finally, this visible reminder affirms to the church family and visitors that children are a vital presence in our community. Parents of preschool age children often express concern that their children's noise distracts others or turns away visitors. While the church readily reassures families that their commitment to children and intergenerational worship will not be dissuaded by the potential of a disgruntled visitor, a written and recorded commitment from our leaders will use the social power of visible leaders to reassure both families and visitors that all ages are welcome to participate in worship.

A Thoughtful Space

If a church existed where a significant percentage of its members had a rare condition that caused them to only grow to three or four feet tall, and if each of the people affected by this condition were also unable to read, the congregation would readily invest time, money, and other resources to make sure the corporate worship experience was accessible to everyone. Nearly one-third of St. John's church family is under five-feet tall with low-levels of literacy; their worship space is designed for adult bodies and minds. Because of the number of infants and toddlers in our community, they will continue to have a large percentage of children too small to comfortably participate in worship and too young to read fluently for the foreseeable future. The church needs to adapt its resources to accommodate children.

Approximately two-thirds of children and families with children at St. John's engage with the service with a degree of regularity and intentionality. While this large percentage differs from the formal understanding of positive deviants, the commonalities of these families offer some helpful insights for systemic change. First, many of these families make a point to help their children see the front of our Sanctuary where musicians play music, congregants lead prayer and Scripture reading, and the priest prepares the Eucharist. Some families sit in the first few rows, others sit their young children on an aisle, and one family brings collapsible step-stools so their sons can view the service more easily. By offering a basket of these collapsible step-stools as a resource for children, St. John's can show their awareness of the needs of young children, help meet that need, and alert parents to the reality that sometimes children disengage because spaces designed for adults are difficult to navigate.

Other families who engage with the service have taught their children some of the order and words of the liturgy so that pre-reading children can participate in saying the Apostle's Creed, The Lord's Prayer, the Sanctus, and the responses before Communion. By creating strings of colored beads where each bead represents a part of our liturgy, and offering these beads with a short written explanation, the church can provide a visual and tactile resource for adults to teach children the order and meaning of elements of the service. When children anticipate parts of the service, they more readily engage throughout it.

By providing collapsible stools and tactile beads in an area of the Sanctuary accessible to children, they can help themselves to the resources they need to engage with the service without waiting for prompting from their parents or an invitation from a worship leader. Children can benefit from developing agency and autonomy as they develop. Curiosity about these resources

may serve as a soft entry-point for children unsure about how to begin to engage with the service. Families may still continue to sit at the back of the Sanctuary, and children may continue to bring toys to occupy themselves, but if resources for a better and deeper form of involvement are normalized by some members of the community, others may begin to see how these resources are used and how the children engage and seek to imitate them. In the past, as some families seemingly facilitate their disengaged children during worship and communion, church leaders assumed these families lacked shared values regarding intergenerational worship, however, they came to realize how likely it is that some of families feel overwhelmed or confused about how to help their child participate in worship. Because church families have segregated along age-grade lines for over three decades now, many young parents raising children in church lack a framework for envisioning a child in a church context. By giving resources and directions, St. John's leaders can help scaffold this experience for both parents and children.

Storytelling: Vision-Casting for Children

The final invitation and form of hospitality the team proposed for St. John's is creating and distributing a story to families with children, tailored for the church. Social stories originated as visual resources to help people with autism understand what to expect or how to act in a new or unfamiliar situation. By learning ahead of time what to expect, children with autism are put at ease and able to function better in the new setting. Neuro-typical children benefit from similar frontloading of information about new or overwhelming situations. By providing a simple narrative that walks through a typical Sunday morning at St. John's families can talk at home in a familiar, comfortable environment about how they might engage with the worship service on a Sunday morning.

Although the direct beneficiary of this story is the child, the narrative also indirectly benefits the parents as it provides a common vocabulary for the parent and child to use while discussing worship and theology. Similar to the physical resources of step-stools and colored beads, a common language and narrative about church provides a form of scaffolding for adults learning to talk with their children about worship. The high-need children in the congregation come from backgrounds where teams of adults work together to help make life understandable and approachable for children. The neuro-typical children in the congregation likely need very little extra explanation in school or home. Because the families of high-need children are already

providing this resourcing in other areas of life, they naturally extend the same supports in church. Even developmentally on-level children will struggle to naturally engage with an intergenerational context that includes complex language and ritual. Through a common narrative, all children and families can use the same vocabulary and resources to learn how to worship God together.

Story also offers the opportunity to validate a child's feelings and frustrations in a way that a list of behaviors, activities, or rules cannot. A child might feel overwhelmed, shy, tired, irritable, lonely, left-out, or distracted at church, just like an adult. If a child feels these things but lacks the ability to express these feelings and knowledge of potential responses, the adult and child together might revert to a behavioristic approach, requiring the child to perform specific actions rather than inviting the child to worship. If a child and adult can see together characters who have a wide-range of valid emotions and responses to engaging in worship at church, they will be able to better understand their own feelings and opportunities for participation in this setting.

Conclusion and Moving Forward

The pinnacle moment of worship service each week at St. John's is celebrating the hospitality of Jesus in sharing God's sustaining and nourishing food with us out of love. All people who want to be fed by God at our spiritual family meal are invited to join the celebration and encouraged at the benediction to go forward extending the same hospitality rooted in Christ throughout the week. The three invitations proposed in this paper seek to extend that hospitality to children, recognizing that too often the rest of our church family unintentionally marginalizes them through our own ignorance.

In some intergenerational church contexts, children are trained how to behave in church, but when children enter into worship and participate in congregational life of their own volition, they turn this behaviorism on its head because true worship cannot be required it can only be given out of love. When churches like St. John's invest time and resources to create environments hospitable to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of children, the children are then able to respond in a worship that leads the rest of the congregation in child-like faith and wonder.