

**GCCHM Leadership Certification
Level V, Course #2**

**Intergenerational Worship
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(Presenter's Notes)**

Children are asking at the Passover, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" All ages are listening together as Joshua renews the covenant with God, Solomon blesses the temple, Nehemiah rebuilds the Jerusalem wall, Jesus hugging and blessing children, Pentecost just as Joel foretold – sons and daughters prophesying, old men dreaming dreams.

In the Bible, God's people have always included all ages in worship. Today churches, however, offer more options. Some churches still have everyone from newborn to people with dementia in the sanctuary together. Others peg the worship hour according to age, ranging from nursery or children's worship for young children to separate worship services for youngsters, middle schoolers, older teens, and college students.

"There's no one simple solution to a very complex set of circumstances," says Howard Vanderwell, who's editing a book about intergenerational worship.

He defines **intergenerational worship** as "**worship in which people of every age are understood to be equally important. Each and all are the church of now.**"

ALL AGES PRESENT

- Intergenerational worship has all ages present – embodying the truth that the whole church is the body of Christ. "Unity is a gift of Christ and it needs to be maintained,"
- Nobody ever talks or debates about whether adults should be in worship. But we do debate whether children should be heard or seen in worship.

GOD IS NOT AGE SPECIFIC

- God's continuing self-revelation is not age-specific. Your children may experience a relationship with God long before they can articulate it," says Steve Burger, director of children and family ministries in the Evangelical Covenant Church's Christian formation department.

- Worshipping with different generations – singing together, holding hands during prayer, sharing communion – helps children form an identity as people who want to celebrate and glorify God together.

WHY DO CHURCHES SPLIT UP PEOPLE BY AGE?

- It's the difference between doxology (right praise) and dogmatics (right belief).
- The Enlightenment emphasis on reason and education shifted worship from participating in faith to learning about faith.
- North American churches have absorbed the culture of consumer choice and target marketing. They advertise to reach families shopping for more church options.

Values of Intergenerational Worship

1. **Church Growth** – The 2005 Faith Communities Today Survey of 884 randomly sampled U.S. congregations found that keeping children with adults can help churches grow – if they also involve children in worship through speaking, reading, and performing (Vandenwell).
2. **Countercultural Character Formation**
 - Though age-groups have their own vocabularies, communication styles, and outlooks – each shaped by particular economic, social, political, and technological realities – Vanderwell cautions against stereotyping or keeping everyone separate.
3. **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**
 - Be more intentional about worshipping together. “Where else in our society do we have such a strategic location to examine and foster the relationships of generations?”
 - Touch, direct eye contact, and the use of individual names help contribute to warm, personal, interactive worship”
4. **CHARACTER BUILDING**
 - Worship forms character that lasts, according to George Aupperlee, who leads worship in dementia units at Holland Home in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
 - The phrase ‘all generations’ appears 91 times in the Bible. God does not form our character all at once or all by himself. Nor does he expect us to unilaterally form our own character. God acts on us through others. Interaction among generations is necessary for forming faith and character. Each age learns from another.

Steve Burger agrees. “Who or what we choose to exclude from our worship gatherings says as much about our community of faith as who or what we choose to include. And, really, does excluding anyone make sense when you realize we’re spending an eternity together?”

Taka Ashida recalls becoming pastor at a Reformed Church of Japan congregation that valued calm and quiet. He discovered that a father with three young sons always stayed in the entrance hall because he’d been told the boys were “so noisy.” Ashida invited the family into the sanctuary. “They needed us; we needed them. The father was so happy to hear that from me. The boys were not always quiet. Some members accepted them. Some complained. But intergenerational worship is a foretaste of the ultimate worship service in heaven. Even a little noise should not stand in the way,” he says.

5. EVERYONE PARTICIPATES, EVERYONE LEARNS

- Intergenerational worship takes humility as well as intention. Older generations can’t lord it over the rest with a “this is how we’ve always done it” attitude. Neither should worship leaders focus on one or two age-groups and ignore others.

Robert Nordling, now co-director of Christian formation and orchestra conductor at Calvin College, recalls a tense moment in a former church of mostly college students, plus “90 faithful older members.” A seniors music group leader asked for copies of the new songs being sung in church. To nitpick? To criticize? Not at all. The woman explained, “Every Tuesday we eat lunch together, have a speaker, and then sing for a little while. We find some of the newer music a bit challenging. I thought if we practiced a bit together on Tuesdays, we might be able to participate better on Sundays. Some of those songs seem pretty difficult... to us anyway.”

Nordling says, “In all my years of music ministry, I had seldom witnessed such selfless maturity! This music would never be the favorite of these good people, but somehow that didn’t seem to matter. Their desire to sing as active participants in worship alongside those younger worshipers allowed them to lay aside their own music preferences in deference to others.”

6. EVERY MEMBER A MINISTER

- Congregations serious about intergenerational worship learn to value what every age offers. This includes being willing to learn together and including all ages in worship leading and worship content.

Anne Zaki grew up in a congregation in a very poor section of downtown Cairo, Egypt. It had only 25 families but served 200 children and 150 adults through education and outreach. “It is a transient congregation because people move out

as soon as they have done better for themselves. So they need to be constantly training ministry leaders. The church motto is ‘Every member is a minister,’” Zaki says. She progressed from setting up Sunday school snacks at age 8 to helping 5-year-olds do crafts when she was 10. By age 12, she and 2 other girls were trained to lead worship and prayers at the weekly youth group meeting. “When I was 14, the church organist groomed me to play the piano at worship services by insisting that I sit next to him on the bench to watch what he did and listen for cues from the pastor and congregation. “Every effort, whether excellent or lacking, was always received with encouragement and appreciation by the whole congregation,” Zaki says.

7. LEARNING ALONGSIDE CHILDREN

- Beth Ann Gaede, an Alban Institute author and editor, used children’s sermons to teach worship.
- Easy to keep the children engaged, as they moved around the sanctuary – to look at paraments, touch symbols carved in the altar, smell things, or practice a simple liturgical action, response, or song. The adults learned alongside the children, and, gradually, the congregation grew in ‘liturgical literacy.
- Clovis Adventist Church in California, got the whole congregation participating in worshipping alongside the children as a faith community.

8. AGE-INCLUSIVE WORSHIP LEADING

- Making worship age-inclusive requires that you value participation more than performance.
- Lift up your hands or sing a line or respond to Scripture can be done by children.

INVOLVE DIFFERENT AGES IN LEADING WORSHIP

- A preschooler turns pages while her father plays violin
- Two teens and a 90-year-old former pastor read Scripture at the same service.
- Whole families sing together on praise teams
- Evening services sometimes begins with a short sanctuary service. Then all ages gather around tables in the narthex to discuss the morning sermon.

Kristy Ruthven, who directs worship and youth programs at Princeton Christian Reformed Church, in Kentwood, Michigan, used a survey to involve different ages in leading worship. She asked about interests, regardless of experience. Parents interviewed and filled out surveys for children too young to write.

“At first, it was little difficult to get people in older age ranges to participate. They’d say, ‘Well, I’m too old for that...’ or ‘I’ve seen my day...’ or ‘my voice is not strong enough.’ But I started attending the twice-monthly senior soup luncheon to eat, play games, and make friends. Now when I call, they know who I am,” Ruthven says.

- When children help lead worship, treat them as peers. Do you (“appreciatively”) laugh at, applaud for, or video adults who sing, read Scripture, or present dramas?
- Try drawing on natural gifts of an age-group for leading liturgy sections. In *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, John D. Witvliet suggests, “For a children’s sermon on Psalm 8, instead of doing an object lesson about scientific wonders they can’t comprehend, try call and response. Let the kids lead the congregation.”
- Congregational prayers can be led by different ages, or groups, and include joys and struggles from each generation.
- Make sure worship images – whether paintings, stained glass, sculpture, banners, digital images, or church bulletins – are inclusive of the whole body of Christ, not just your congregation,
- Even if children and youth don’t attend your worship, have the kids with you for a short time when the service begins. At least once a month, have All-Church Sabbath. Invite children and families to help lead parts of worship. Make it experiential.

“I wonder if we could be missing how our children are trying to lead us by confusing performance and worship. When our responses signal to them that we expect them to be ‘cute’ rather than an intrinsic part of the drama of worship, we may have missed their contribution to the dialogue between God and his people,” says Jan Zuidema, music ministries director at Second Christian Reformed Church in Grand Haven, Michigan.

Books May Give You Insight Into Outlooks And Concerns Of People Younger Or Older Than You Are.

- *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family and Community* by Scottie May & others.
- *Thinking Through the Children’s Sermon* by William H. Armstrong
- *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* edited by Dorothy Bass and Don Richter
- *Growing Up Christian* by Karl Graustein
- *Embracing Midlife: Congregations as Support Systems* by Lynne Baab
- *Settling In: My First Year in a Retirement Community* by Richard L. Morgan