

# Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

## Nine Tips for Designing Intergenerational Worship

Looking for simple ways to introduce intergenerational worship ideas without totally overhauling everything about your worship services? Here are nine tips to get you started.

By: [Joan Huyser-Honig](#)

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### 1. Create a checklist to include each generation's needs and gifts.

Worship planning teams at Wheaton (IL) Christian Reformed Church have a music balance checklist that includes a “kid friendly” column, so leaders remember to include favorite Sunday school songs. They also ask people from different generations, including children and youth, to read scripture, lead the congregational prayer, or participate in a drama or dramatic reading.

### 2. Offer one-time and seasonal opportunities.

Advent is a good time to introduce intergenerational elements. “Advent tends to be a time when people are pretty charitable about children's efforts,” says Jane Vogel, co-author of [Sunday Morning Live: How and why we worship](#).

You might use an Advent wreath and ask a different family to light it each Sunday. Or use Wheaton (IL) Christian Reformed Church's idea of a liturgical dance procession to light Advent candles. The dance is open to anyone willing to dance and attend practices. “Last December the dancers included students from kindergarten through college, on up through middle-aged adults,” Vogel says.

You might also try a “church family band” or multiage choir for Advent or a specific Sunday or a summer month.

If your church does an annual retreat or church campout, consider asking the youth group to lead and plan Sunday morning worship there. Ask them to include people of all ages in the service.

### 3. Reinforce the “we are all Christ's body” feeling.

Encourage families to sit together. Empty nesters, singles, and other adults can make a point of sitting with people who come alone, especially college students or children whose parents do not attend.

### 4. Broaden your idea of who may be interested in learning and participating.

Instead of assuming that only adults of a certain age really care about worship, look for ways to address needs of different ages in different parts of the service. Aim to offer at least something that will connect with every generation. Remember that the group from post-college to elderly includes many stages and experiences of life.

Open up service opportunities so more people get a chance to experience that their presence and gifts matter to the whole church. Consider using people of all ages as greeters, ushers, offering collectors, technical equipment operators, musicians, praise team leaders, and contributors of specific items for sermon illustrations.

### 5. Introduce your children's worship program (if you have one) to adult worshippers.

In some churches where children worship apart from the adults, church education leaders write their own material—so that children and adults cover the same themes and topics.

Pattern a main worship service after the children's worship liturgy, and have a children's worship leader serve as liturgist, explaining each worship element to the adults. This idea resulted in a wonderful service at Wheaton (IL) Christian Reformed Church. “Because we've been using that program for years, every child from 10th grade on down was familiar with it, and the younger children were thrilled to have ‘their’ worship be the pattern for our worship,” Vogel says.

### 6. Start an intergenerational worship team.

How much knowledge does someone need to help design worship? Not as much as you'd think, as long as someone on the

team understands the basic elements of worship, according to intergenerational worship expert Carolyn C. Brown.

“If the service is on forgiveness, you can read the text together and then ask an eight-year-old for ideas on how to present it so younger people can understand it. As you write a prayer for forgiveness, you can ask the children for their perspective,” Brown suggests.

### **7. Find ways to make scripture clear to all ages.**

“In normal services, I’d get lost when the Bible passage was real long, because I didn’t really understand it,” says Virginia Zander, 11, a worship design team member at Trinity Episcopal Church in St. Mary’s City, Maryland. She says skits about the Bible lessons sometimes help younger children understand the passage.

Pantomime also helps kids get the message. “The text about Mary and Martha is so short that many kids don’t get into the story till it’s over. But you can include a pantomime with Mary, sitting beside Jesus, and Martha, standing with a towel over her shoulder and her hands on her hips. Ask the adult women to pantomime expressions during the scripture reading. Kids will look at Martha’s face and think, ‘Oh, I know that look. That means trouble,’” Brown says.

Consider using Bible readings from a translation that’s easy to understand. Print a children’s bulletin and activity sheet based on the day’s scripture and sermon topics.

### **8. Make worship tactile.**

Virginia Zander began to understand confession and assurance of pardon when Trinity Episcopal Church introduced a tactile element in its new service format.

“Before the prayer of confession, everyone gets a stone, and you think of putting your sins into the stone—all the things we wish we had done and all the things we wish we had not done. Then a younger kid goes around with a basin to collect the stones. When water gets poured over the stones, it shows how Christ washes away our sins.

“It’s special how those things connected with me. I started thinking during the week about how it would be kind of nice not to have so many sins to put onto the stone next Sunday,” she says.

### **9. Design visual worship experiences.**

Use puppets, drama, dance, object lessons, and other visual aids to help young and old remember the message.

Carefully-chosen visuals resulted in a powerfully dramatic service at Trinity Episcopal Church. From the day’s four [lectionary](#) passages, worship design team members chose [Mark 13:1-8](#) as the heart of their service plan. In this passage, Jesus describes signs of the end times as birth pains of a new age.

The team developed a slide show to accompany Father John Ball’s reading of the Mark passage. As he read about the end times, worshipers saw images of shattered churches, starving children, earthquakes, wars, and famines.

“We accompanied the reading and slideshow with a steady beat of drums, sinking the images deep. When Jesus spoke of birth pangs, the images reflected new beginnings: sunrises, plants in spring, newborns...

“Moms put their arms around their children as they listened and watched. We wondered whether it was too hard,” says worship consultant Caroline Fairless.

Ball’s homily was conversational. He asked people to say where these things were happening, how they found hope that God can bring new beginnings. Children, teens, and adults eagerly shared their thoughts.

“It was a hard moment, but it was safe. One woman noted how appropriate it is that we call these ‘the end times,’ because we have the capacity to end these times of hunger and war. Prayers of the people lifted up areas suffering from what they had just seen. Children, who always have access to paper and markers, drew some of the images they’d seen,” Fairless says.

During the Eucharist, worshipers celebrated the body and blood of Christ as the pathway to peace. The congregation was invited to model signs of the new age by giving to [The Heifer Project](#). Virginia Zander, dressed in a giant sheep’s head costume, collected the offering.

“It was a powerful service for kids and adults. Services like that one showed me that when you focus on a central thought, you can express yourself, worship more as a group, and feel more part of the service,” says Virginia’s mother, Sylvia Zander.

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Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

1855 Knollcrest Circle SE Grand Rapids, MI 49546-4402 USA

(616) 526-6088 [worship@calvin.edu](mailto:worship@calvin.edu)

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