

Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]
Series: Worship Workbench
Issue: Essay 225 + December 2018
Copyright: © 2018 Paul F. Bosch.

*This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes
with credit to the author and mention of < www.worship.ca > as the source.*



WELCOMING KIDS AND YOUTH TO WORSHIP Five Steps to Age-Inclusive Worship

- 1 What's wrong with this picture?
- 2 You're attending a service of Christian worship. As you enter the church, you're aware that all the Greeters and Ushers are middle-aged, grey-haired males.
- 3 As worship begins, you note that Presiding Minister and Assisting Minister are both middle-aged, grey-haired males.
- 4 There is no Acolyte. The choir is composed chiefly of middle-aged: grey-haired males and middle-aged grey-haired females.
- 5 The Lectors – those who read the Bible lections – are all middle-aged, grey-haired males or females.
- 6 You get the picture. What's wrong with it? There's a pretty narrow demographic here, you admit to yourself. This assembly is a place for the middle-aged, and the grey-haired. There's no sign that this place, this community, is welcoming to kids or to young people – not just to the middle-aged and the grey-haired.
- 7 That's sadly an all-too-familiar perception, in many of our churches. There is no sign, no signal, in much Christian worship these days, that this place, this community, is age-inclusive.
- 8 Now – assuming we want to change that perception – how can we do it? How can we make our worship more age-inclusive? The term “catholic” – small c – means inclusive. Not lacking in any of its parts. All-embracing. Now, how can we show – demonstrate, exhibit – that catholicity on Sunday morning?
- 9 Here are five suggestions for making our weekly worship welcoming to all. Really all. Kids and youth included.
- 10 FIRST, I'd want to preserve and to celebrate an Important Principle: That catholic worship – small c – means to enlarge and to educate the human spirit. I've argued before – See Essay 189 above, “Worship for Grown-ups” – that Christian worship is its own culture. It will not be immediately accessible. Worship will not resemble a rock concert or a TV talk show. It would be a mistake to “dumb down” our wonderful Tradition in worship simply to attract the young.

11 I cling to a Biblical warrant for this Important Principle. From the Bible, *Ephesians* 4:16-18: “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine...But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,...”

12 By all means, sing some pop hymns and some “praise choruses.” But beware of this: Many pop hymns and “praise choruses” are simple-minded to the point of infantilizing. Be certain to sing the widest variety of hymns from our glorious ecumenical Tradition, like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley – and even the German chorales! – but do not neglect the wonderful growing library of world hymnody. Stretch yourself and your people! Be eager to grow! Teach your people to be eager to grow!

13 Bring guitars into worship – Hey, bring a drum set and electronic keyboard! But don’t tear out or ignore your splendid pipe organ. We’re trying to enlarge the human spirit, not diminish it. Not infantilize it.

14 Resist the temptation to install a ceiling projector and screen. See Essays 193 and 198 above.

15 Among other considerations that arise from this Important Principle (in 10 above) is this: Christian worship has always been, and remains today, “post-literate”. There should be little or no reading required of worshippers, except perhaps the hymns. To require worshippers to read long paragraphs of prose or even poetry is to send the message: “You are not welcome here unless you can read...” More specifically, “...unless you can read English...”

16 To require that worshippers in the pews read is to freeze out the aged with poor eyesight, the illiterate, and little kids who have not learned to read yet. We pay our clergy, our worship leaders – and educate them! – to be the literate ones. That’s their vocation. Worshippers in the pew should not be required to read anything. Except hymn texts. And even hymns might often be simple call-and-response. The week’s psalm is best sung responsorially, with the assembly repeating a simple refrain or antiphon that could be taught and learned on the spot. The choir does all the “heavy lifting.” by singing the verses.

17 There are many other implications of this Important Principle that I’ll leave for you to discover. My point here is simply to encourage an appreciation of, a devotion to, the full magnificent Tradition of our church’s worship. Let’s not “dumb it down”. Let’s not encourage a faith that’s always immature. We want grown-up Christians, not babies in faith.

18 This brings me to my SECOND point: Most Christian churches are woefully unprepared to nurture a mature faith. Sure, we all – even clergy! – begin our Christian adventure “as new-born babes, [desiring] the sincere milk of the word”. (*1 Peter* 2:2) But we’ll only grow in faith and discipleship if we’re willing to learn. And if we’re taught. I’m arguing here for a full program of worship education in each Christian parish. Mystogogy is its fancy name in English, from the Greek: “initiating into the mysteries”.

19 Every Christian parish should feature articles, regularly, in its parish newsletter about the meaning of Christian worship. Weekly bulletin announcements in the guide to worship.

20 I'd recommend brief verbal announcements, almost every Sunday, about what we do and why we do it in worship.

21 I'd interrupt worship shamelessly every now and then to drive home a point about our ritual practice. In my campus ministry days, it was the Baptist Chaplain (Yes!) who observed that worship among the Roman Catholic and Lutheran and Anglican communities was much more free and "loose" than among the Protestant communities, like the Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, United Church, or Pentecostal campus ministries!

22 Whenever I preside, it is my habit to make a brief comment about the Hymn of the Day after the sermon: Its author or composer, something notable in text or tune. I like to think my evident enthusiasm for this hymn is contagious.

23 And perhaps once each year, a parish might schedule a full-blown Instructed Eucharist, as it is sometimes called. This is the custom of enlisting a reader to provide brief comments or interpretations at each significant moment in the Holy Communion, interrupting worship with mystagogy. An Instructed Eucharist is especially appropriate during the Easter Season, when we are presumably welcoming the newly-baptized into our assemblies.

24 THIRD: Very important. Put kids and youth to work in worship leadership. I'd make it a point, as parish pastor, to require that kids in Confirmation Classes serve in a rota as Acolytes. Never a Sunday, during the weeks of Confirmation instruction – hey, all during the year! – without an Acolyte. If you expect to be confirmed, you must serve your turn as Acolyte.

25 Importantly: Acolytes do not have to read or even speak. They serve as book bearers, cross bearers, candle bearers. And they must be trained in their very important ministries. And not necessarily by a pastor. Give the job of the training of Acolytes to a respected congregational member.

26 Following the same principle: I'd train my youth to expect a similar discipleship once they have been confirmed. After Confirmation, in this parish, you're expected to serve in other "grown up" roles of worship leadership. There are many roles in worship leadership to be filled. Assisting Minister (for youth with a good sense of presence). Lector. Choir. Banner bearer. Altar Guild. Guitarist. Usher. Committee member. Youth like to feel they're good at something. Put that desire to work.

27 Unfortunately, you can't enforce this principle as you can once kids are confirmed: You don't have that carrot of Confirmation to wield at the end. But a parish can become accustomed to this tradition.

28 To see kids and youth, every Sunday, Sunday after Sunday, in one role or another of worship leadership, up front, is to model an age-inclusive, truly catholic community.

29 FOURTH: Seek and find ways to make worship as kinetic as possible. Worship is action. At the Supper, Jesus says, "DO this..." Get people moving. Teach youth and adults about committing the body itself to prayer. The body often learns more quickly than words. And retains more.

30 Of course, the aged and the handicapped are exempt from much of what follows, 31 to 42. Of course.

31 I'd make it a point to teach Confirmation class kids to make the Sign of the Cross upon going to bed, upon arising, and at any time in worship where you see that little red cross in the texts of our worship books. See *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*, pages 94 and 96 and elsewhere. That's an enacted prayer; You don't need words. But it's heavy stuff. You are marking the cross of Christ on your own psyche, on your very body.

32 I'd try to teach my parish to avoid kneeling – to avoid even bowing the head! – for each and every moment of corporate prayer. See 34, 35, and 36 below. But kneeling is appropriate at times of Confession. Read the rubrics – the red directions – in *ELW* on pages 95, 239, 316, 321 and elsewhere.

33 I'd be willing to endorse – and to encourage in our worship at moments of Confession – an expressive and ancient gesture of grief: A three fold beating of the breast. It needn't be a mighty breast-beating like Tarzan, from the full elbow. Simply lay your forearm across your chest and move your fist at the wrist. Three times, at the words in Confession "...in thought, word, and deed." (Even more appropriately, in *Compline* at words now omitted from *ELW*, although retained in its predecessor, *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* "...by my fault, by my own fault, by my own most grievous fault...")

34 Apart from such moments of Confession, I'd encourage all other prayer in corporate worship to be prayed, by all, in the graceful and evocative orans posture, the ancient posture of Jewish prayer that would have been familiar to Jesus: Stand erect, head and face and arms and hands lifted, palms up, eyes open and fixed "up there" somewhere. Start with the Lord's Prayer.

35 Luther reminds us: We are children of God, actual Christs to one another. So: No groveling. No unseemly false humility. Teaching this to old-time worshippers will take some tact and patience. And assure everyone that God will hear your prayers, even if you choose to pray by bowing your head and closing your eyes and folding your hands.

36 But in my view, that prayer posture sends the wrong signals. So I say: Remember: We are royalty, in Christ. Claim that honour in your very body. Every Sunday! At every prayer!

37 Plan to hold processions regularly, with kids and youth given roles to play, bearing cross or candles or banners. Remember: A church procession is basically a protest march. Our ultimate loyalty is not to the Emperor, but to Christ. (Not incidentally, that's also part of the kinetic witness of coming forward to the Table at Communion, rather than passively receiving Bread and Cup at your seat. Your coming forward to the Table in procession signals your individual engagement, your personal commitment, in Christian discipleship.)

38 Make the most of the Seasons of the Church Year. Enlist youth in lighting an Advent Candle each week before Christmas. Put in place in your worship space ten or fourteen Stations of the Cross, and use them during Lent. Or use the church's neighbourhood itself for Stations, during Holy Week. (See Essay 200 above.) Process outdoors on Palm Sunday – a terrific witness to the neighbourhood! Process outside to Bless the Fields – your parish garden? – during the Easter season.

39 Never fail to gather all the children present at the Font for every Baptism. For that matter: Invite the entire assembly to gather at the font for all Baptisms, or for the rite of Thanksgiving for Baptism.

40 Distribute bells and tambourines and noise-makers to kids, and let them use them, under adult supervision, during hymns and even at the Gospel Acclamations on festive Days and during festive Seasons. (See Essay 202 above.)

41 Provide a kind of Agape Meal of finger foods along with Bread and Cup on *Quasi Modo Geniti* Sunday. (Essay 90 above.) Enlist youth to serve it.

42 Use the *Quem Queritis* trope on Easter Sunday (Essay 201 above), enlisting youth as actors.

43 The possibilities are endless. Seek to honour our magnificent worship Tradition. (10 above.) And use your imagination!

44 FINALLY, plan for two Youth Groups: an Acolyte Guild during Confirmation years, and a Post-Confirmation Youth Group for youth who've been Confirmed. I remember with great fondness my own years in Luther League. (Remember that, you old timers?) Most parishes manage to maintain a Men's Group and a Women's Group. Why not a Youth Group? I am aware of the hectic schedules of many young people these days, with sports practices and a host of other competing claims on young people's time.

45 But begin with a project: Something to engage young people in some worthwhile parish project or community endeavour. When that's over, who knows? They might want to stick together for some weeks or months or even years afterward!

+ + +