



Children and Worship

A Program of
The Presbyterian Church in Canada
in partnership with
The Christian Reformed Church in NA
The Reformed Church in America

The *Children and Worship* is a beautiful way to present biblical stories through worship. This program helps children experience and learn about God. The program was developed by Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman and is described in their book, *Young Children and Worship*.

Children and Worship is cross-cultural and effective in a wide variety of Christian denominations. Today, Children and Worship can be experienced in North America, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, and South Africa. The program works well across a wide age span and is ideal for small congregations where classes are formed with children of various ages.

Children and Worship has been influenced by the philosophy of Maria Montessori and Sofia Cavaletti, author of *The Religious Potential of the Child*. It is designed for use in Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Children and Worship

By Dorothy Henderson

The *Children and Worship* program is a new way of helping children worship in a special place apart from the worshipping congregation until they feel able to worship with the congregation. In some congregations it is used in place of church school for younger children. In others it is used in place of a Junior Church program during the service when Church School is held before the church service.

The central, unifying act of the Christian community is worship. Janice Walker likes to worship every Sunday, but some mornings. . .

Janice gets out of her car in the church parking lot. She takes a deep breath, then opens the car door for Jamie and Beth. It is only 10 a.m., but Janice is already longing for evening, when she will tuck her impish offspring into bed. Jamie jumps out of the car, holding a coloured marker over his head, out of Beth's reach. Beth, who has been whining and begging for the marker all the way to church, bursts into tears. Janice grabs the marker, takes each child firmly by the hand and, looking straight ahead, marches into church.

It is the first morning of a new program called *Children and Worship*. Last Tuesday she attended an information night but, since then, she has had reservations about the program. The leaders were enthusiastic and well trained. But, thought Janice, kids just

don't act like that—listening and using story material in a quiet, worshipful atmosphere for a whole hour. She walks into the church hall. Beth is still whimpering, and Jamie is dragging his feet.

Rounding the corner to the new children's worship centre, Janice notices children lined up outside the door. A man is kneeling beside the first child in the row.

"Hi. My name is Paul, and I'm the greeter today. What are your names?"

The children answer.

"Hello, Sarah and Jamie. In our new worship centre we have all the time we need, so we don't have to hurry. We walk more slowly and talk more quietly. Are you ready to go in and meet the worship leader?"

The worship leader is already seated in the room on the carpet. She, too, welcomes Sarah and Jamie and invites them to sit on a circle and talk quietly until all of the children have entered.

Janice waits anxiously. Will Jamie and Beth be cooperative? What if they cling to her or refuse to enter? But, like the other children who have come with their parents for the orientation last Tuesday, Jamie and Beth nod to the greeter that they are ready to enter.

Later, calmed, comforted and inspired by her own worship experience, Janice goes to the worship centre to get Jamie and Beth. She watches at the door as, one by



one, the children go to the worship leader, who whispers a special blessing to each child.

On the way home, the children are quiet. Janice can hardly believe it. Lucky first day, she thinks, but I'll enjoy it while it lasts.

Much to Janice's surprise, things don't change. Each ride home from church is calm. Sometimes the children tell each other a story about a good shepherd or a great pearl. Janice is impressed but baffled. What is happening in the *Children and Worship* time?

She was soon given the opportunity to find out. The worship leader phoned her.

"Our greeter, Paul, is going to be out of town for a three-week business trip. Would you consider acting as a greeter, Janice?"

In the weeks that followed, Janice got an inside view of *Children and Worship*. She led each child to the wide circle. The worship leader had been praying quietly, waiting for the children to enter, but now she smiled and said, "In this place we walk more slowly and talk more quietly, because someone might be talking to God and we don't want to disturb them."

When all the children had arrived, they began to sing *Be Still and Know That I Am God*. Instead of using finger plays or random actions, they used signing for the deaf.

"When we sing this song, it is a sign that we are ready to hear one of God's stories. Watch closely where I go so you will always know where this story is kept."

The leader walks to a shelf and chooses a box covered with gold. She walks slowly back to the circle, sits down and places the box on the floor in front of the children. There is a hush in the room. All eyes are on the golden box.

"I wonder if this is a parable...it could be...parables are very precious...like gold...and this box is gold." She gently runs her hand around the edge of the box. "This looks like a present...well, parables are like presents. They are given to us. We can't buy them or sell them. They are gifts. But I still don't know if this is a parable."

She opens the box a little. Slowly she removes circles of felt—green, brown and blue. "This is so green...I wonder what could be so green?"

Gradually the pieces of felt create a scene. Everyone knows that something very important is going to happen.

"Once there was someone who said such amazing things and did such wonderful things that people began to follow him. But they did not know who he was. One day they simply had to ask him, and he said: "I am the Good Shepherd. I know each one of my sheep by name."

Slowly the story unfolds. The worship leader slides the sheep and the shepherd around the felt circle. The story is thought-provoking, awe-invoking.

Objects are handled carefully, expressing value and love. Later, Janice notices, the children use this same approach to "work" with the story, retelling it and letting it speak to them. At the end of the story the worship leader says, "I wonder if this sheep has a name...."

"I think it is called Sarah," Sarah replied.

"It could be Sarah," the teacher nods. "I wonder who the Good Shepherd really is...."

"Maybe it's God. Maybe not. Maybe it's Jesus."

Then the children are invited to make an individual response to the story. The worship leader invites the children, one by one, to choose what they would like to do. Sarah chooses to work with the parable. She walks over to the shelf where the individual carpets are stored. She drapes one over her shoulder and walks to an open space in the room. Slowly she unrolls and smooths her carpet. This has become her private response space. No one will come into her space and bother her. Just as no one interrupts Sarah's grandfather who is worshipping with the adults, no one will interrupt Sarah's private response time. Sarah has chosen to retell the Good Shepherd story. She walks back to the shelf and picks up the gold parable box. The worship leader and other children notice that she is settled. Another child is invited to make a choice and set up his private response carpet. He will paint a picture.

The worship leader glances over to Sarah but does not interfere with how Sarah is using the parable. She is moving the sheep and talking to them. "You are a bad, bad sheep and I am going to hit you," she says in a deep voice. Sarah moves the shepherd close. "This is Sarah and she is my sheep, and I will take care of her."

With the story, Sarah is working at a painful, unhappy part of her life. Nearby, Jamie is painting sheep—bright green sheep like the green in the pasture.

Later, the worship leader rings a tiny bell. The children roll up their carpets and return to the circle. Beth brings the Bible to the circle and Jamie carefully lifts the Christ candle from the shelf. The leader opens the Bible and says, "This is the Bible. The story about the Good Shepherd is in the Bible." The Bible is then opened to the story. Part or all of it is read and a marker with a story symbol is placed in the Bible so the children can easily find it.

The leader reaches behind and lifts a big, colourful church year calendar from the shelf. "Today is the first day in Lent—a time when we learn to walk with Jesus. Purple is the colour of Lent." The leader points to purple in the calendar. She spreads out a small purple cloth and sets the candle on the carpet. The Christ candle is lit.

Next, the children and leader offer prayers of thanksgiving and prepare for the "feast." The feast, a sign of the Messianic banquet, is a reminder that every Sunday is a feast day in celebration of Jesus' resurrection. The greeter walks to each child and passes out small purple napkins. Carefully, the leader and the children prepare their "paper table" for the feast. Fruit, crackers or bread, cheese and juice are served.

A short benediction is offered. The children tidy the room, then go to the worship leader for a positive, affirming word before leaving the centre.

Textbooks and Training

All listed resources are available from the Book Room, 50 Wynford Drive, Toronto, ON, M3C 1J7; 800.619.7301, bookroom@presbyterian.ca

- The book *Young Children and Worship* by Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman gives a detailed description of the worship program. This book outlines 40 Bible stories related to the liturgical year. Patterns for storytelling are included. Published by Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1989.
- *Following Jesus*, Sonja Stewart, Geneva Press, 2000. This book is designed for children who have experienced the Children and Worship program for at least two years and are five to eight years of age. Thirty-two Bible stories from the New Testament are included.
- *Teaching Godly Play: The Sunday Morning Handbook*, Jerome Berryman, Abingdon Press, 1995. This book is a practical guide to leading worship with children.
- An introductory DVD, *Helping Children Experience God: The Children and Worship Program*, may be received at no cost from Presbyterian national offices. Call or email the Vine Helpline at 866-642-2830, vinehelpline@presbyterian.ca
- *Lift Up Your Hands*, a signing video for Children and Worship, PCC. This video includes the signs for several common choruses and Christian greetings.

Several training events to prepare children's worship leaders are available each year in the United States and Canada. For a list of Canadian trainers or for more information about the Children and Worship program, contact the Program Coordinator (see page 6).

Time has passed quickly. Ahh, thinks Janice, time does go by in a hurry. It will be no time at all until Beth and Jamie are joining me in worship every Sunday. Patterns have become familiar to them in *Children and Worship—Preparing to Approach God, Approaching God, Hearing the Word of God, Responding and Giving Thanks, and Going Out in God's Name*. These same patterns, muses Janice, are what we do in the worshipping community.

Through her mind flashes memories of the lighted Lenten candle, the purple Bible marker, and the *Great Prayer of Thanksgiving before Communion*. She smiles as she imagines Jamie in a few years—a lanky 11-year-old standing beside her. In her imagination, little Beth has grown taller, too. They have grown to know that in this place they have all the time they need. They walk more slowly and talk more quietly. People are talking to God—and so are Jamie and Beth.

Children and Worship is a program of
The Presbyterian Church in Canada
50 Wynford Drive
Toronto, ON
M3C 1J7

Program Coordinator: Nina Zwart
Phone: 519.451.6713
Email: nina.zwart@sympatico.ca

First Steps

- If you want to learn more about *Children and Worship* visit a church near you that is using the program.
- Visit The Presbyterian Church in Canada website at www.presbyterian.ca and/or the ecumenical Children and Worship website www.childrenandworship.org
- Contact a trainer from the list on the Presbyterian Church website.
- Borrow the book *Young Children and Worship* from the church you visited, from a trainer, or purchase a copy from the Book Room at national offices (800.619.7301).
- Arrange an introductory evening for session members and interested parents to view the video. Invite a trainer to demonstrate a story and answer questions.
- Meet with the session to discuss the implications of introducing this program. The session needs to be comfortable with more involvement of the children in the worship life of the congregation as a result of being part of this program.
- Arrange for at least three people to take the training (14 hours) to set up a worship centre in your own congregation.
- Find a person interested in woodworking to make your wooden figures and a sewing group or craftsperson to prepare the story materials and room (patterns are provided in *Young Children and Worship*), or purchase the wooden figures for the stories. For a price list, contact Nina Zwart, Children and Worship Program Coordinator (519.451.6713; nina.zwart@sympatico.ca).