



# Ways to Create VIBRANT WORSHIP for All Ages

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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Children participate in the “Noisy Offering Sunday” at Lochwinnoch Church, Renfrew County, ON.

*“I care about congregations adopting practices of worship for all ages because we have gifts to share with each other. The image of God resides in each of us our whole lives long. Each season of life offers us fresh insight, unique ways of connecting with God and new abilities that we can share with the worshipping community.”* —Sarah Bentley Allred

**As part of her studies at Virginia Theological Seminary, Sarah Bentley Allred—editor at the faith formation website *Building Faith* ([buildfaith.org](http://buildfaith.org))—had the opportunity to visit congregations practicing intergenerational worship.**

While most church services are multigenerational (i.e., many generations are present in worship together), intergenerational worship is intentionally designed with the needs of people of diverse ages in mind. Bentley Allred’s visits led her to identify five key traits present in churches that seek to equally value people of all ages in worship. Below you will find a description of these traits and questions you can ask to deepen your commitment to being a worshipping community for all ages.

**INTENTIONALITY:** Churches practicing intergenerational worship intentionally consider how accessible their worship service is for different generations. This goes beyond exploring a children/adult generational divide to wondering how the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, as distinctive generations, can be invited to more full participation in worship. These churches consider questions such as:

- How reasonable is the length of the service in terms of the attention span of various generations?
- How accessible is the music for people of various generations, especially non-readers (i.e., young children, people with disabilities, seniors with low vision)?
- Are there images or stories in the sermon that connect with different generations?
- Are people of different generations represented in worship leadership?

**FULL PARTICIPATION:** In some churches, a few leaders actively facilitate worship while the congregation is relatively passive. Churches practicing intergenerational worship emphasize the full participation of all worshippers. These churches look for ways to extend leadership invitations to as many people as possible and are deliberate about including a variety of generations. Encouraging full participation in worship might include using images during the sermon so that people can participate through sight and sound. It might include creative presentations of scripture such as Biblical storytelling or skits. It might include intentional times of quiet marked by a bell or inviting people to play percussion instruments during some songs. These churches consider questions such as:

- During what elements of the liturgy is the congregation most passive?

- How can the congregation more fully engage with the liturgy physically, emotionally and/or spiritually?
- How are all five senses (sight, touch, taste, hearing, smell) engaged by the liturgy?
- Are there any elements of the liturgy that could include more movement?

**COMMITMENT OF TIME:** Churches practicing intergenerational worship commit a significant amount of time to preparing for worship. For some, this time might be spent in training worship leaders from musicians and readers to intercessors, communion servers and ushers so that leadership can be shared work. For some this time might be spent in sermon writing so that diverse ages can connect with the preaching. For others this time might be spent in intergenerational relationship building outside of worship so that the Body of Christ can gather as a more intentional family in liturgy. These churches consider questions such as:

- What aspects of our liturgy need additional attention in order to best engage a wide range of people? Who in our community might have gifts for this work as well as time to offer?
- How might worship be different if we committed additional time in preparation? What would that look like?

**REFLECTION AND RESPONSIVENESS:** In churches practicing intergenerational worship, intentional reflection about worship is a common feature. The leaders in these churches create opportunities for worshippers to articulate what they noticed and to be heard by the community. The emphasis is on “noticing” and “wondering” rather than expressing personal likes and dislikes. This reflection can take place in many ways. Some congregations gather for fifteen minutes weekly, right after worship. Some offer a reflection gathering monthly. Some invite reflections in a weekly email. No matter the format, these occasions for reflection give church leaders a chance to hear the experience of people in the pews and give people in the pews a chance to be heard. Worship leaders do not necessarily make changes solely based on community reflections, but the reflections provide opportunities to be attentive to where the Spirit is moving during worship and what is distracting people from encountering God. These churches consider questions such as:

- What did you notice during worship today?
- Where have you been feeling most connected to God during worship?
- What aspects of the liturgy have hindered your ability to worship?

**MESSINESS:** There are many churches in which worship is led by a small number of highly trained individuals. Often, this leads worship to feel polished and orderly. In churches practicing intergenerational worship, liturgy tends to feel a bit messier. When the work of leadership is shared across the age spectrum, and there is an emphasis on the full participation of worshippers, it is inevitable that something will not go “as planned.” Someone will read the wrong lesson, forget to take up the offering, spill the wine or be running into church at the last minute. Sometimes these small blunders are funny, sometimes embarrassing and sometimes distracting. But the end result seems theologically sound: there is a sense that worshiping God is about presence and togetherness not perfection. These churches consider questions such as:

- How can we respond with grace and flexibility when worship does not go “as planned”?
- What are the gifts of imperfection in worship?
- Are there ways in which we can better support worship leaders in the future?