

Family Meeting for Worship in the Monthly Meeting

by Christel Jorgenson

What a challenge our form of worship is for children! Even if you just consider the visuals--"still forms on every side"--it looks like a room full of adults either falling asleep or being punished with a "time out!" How can children be helped to feel the depth, the quickening, the opportunity to encounter God that draws us together?

I would like to share what many of us at Friends Meeting at Cambridge have found helpful. For many years we've had what we call "family worship" the first Sunday of each month, held in the social room at the same hour as traditional unprogrammed worship in the meetinghouse. First Day School is not held that Sunday; the preschool through sixth grade children and their parents, along with any older youth or adults who wish to come, are invited. It serves as a chance for families to get acquainted, and for the rest of the meeting to have an opportunity to interact with children and families. It's also a monthly break for First Day School teachers, since family worship help is recruited from outside the teacher pool.

When I volunteered to be the new coordinator of the family worship, I knew many teachers and parents were hungering for help in developing their children's unprogrammed worship skills. How can we help children understand our worship? Can we use a program to enhance the unprogrammed experience? I also wanted to have an active time with children, giving them a space to praise and rejoice with body and voice, to use their eagerness and sense of wonder and imagination. I had in mind the work of Jerome Berryman and Godly Play™. His premise is that young children can be immersed in the mystery of scripture in their own, concrete-thinking kind of way, using their bodies, imagination, and play to relate to God and their worshipping community. I share his sense that our Christian heritage has deep stories to tell. I wanted our children to hear them, to experience them as much as possible, in a way that invites them in. I also wanted something that adults might also be able to enter experientially.

When I say these words, I wonder how close we have come to this ideal. I know that we have had moments. Does it work for everyone? Probably not. Not all parents and kids participate. But I feel that if it's done with love and care, it might be significant for many. I don't feel required to please everyone, but to be faithful as God leads.

Below is a rough outline of our themes and activities for the past year, followed by a few words on the way we carried them out.

October--Welcome. Zaccheus story (Luke 19:1-9). Participate by being in the play. Simple worship intro.

November--Being thankful Corrie Ten Boom story acted out. Small group sharing. Worship intro by Ministry and Counsel member.

December--Light. Advent wreaths and Hanukkah: candle and rug; candles to hold; guided meditation about light and love. Decorate candles at the end.

January--Gifts for God Feast of the Three Kings (Matthew 2:1–12). Tell the story with crèche figures on the floor. Art projects (crowns and gifts) or discussion. Worship using candle and rug and small pieces of wax to hold.

February--Love and Connection Story of Moses and the Ten Best Ways to Live. Ref: "Young Children and Worship," by Sonja Steward and Jerome Berryman. Tell story with cardboard tablets, ten cutouts. Everyone makes own eleventh commandment on paper as a link in a chain. Worship using rug, candle, and a ribbon connecting us.

March--Images of God Story told with *_In God's Name_*, by S. E. Sasso. Make collages/ pictures of images of God, string on clothesline. Worship using rug, candle, surrounded by pictures.

April--Spiritual Journey Story of The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). Tell story with flannel board. Introduce finger labyrinths. Worship using rug, candle, and finger labyrinth. After worship option: decorate one's labyrinth.

May--Caring Story about birds in scripture (especially the dove in Noah's ark), caring for birds. Everyone makes paper birds to hang on a tree in the room. Worship using rug, candle. After worship option: Making bird feeders.

June--Celebration Share about the worship tools of the year, the themes, recap of songs. Worship using rug and candle.

Regardless of our theme, love is always our topic.

The program takes into account the meanings of physical symbols and children's physical reality. Taking care with these things is a practical way to express love to the children.

We provide consistency and continuity.

We use the same format, more or less, for each session. It usually takes about 70 minutes, which puts us in sync with the other meeting for worship which goes for an hour plus announcements and introductions. Each segment of the program is short and movement is encouraged between them ("get up and stretch") if the activity itself is not physically active.

Here is a description of our program format:

- A. *Welcome and greeting each other.* After a welcome and review of the format by the facilitator, everyone is asked to get up to greet someone else, with one's name and some bit of conversation, like a favorite

- something, tied in to time of year or meeting theme. One time we did clumping, which is grouping with people for whom the answer is the same, such as "favorite thing to do in snow."
- B. *Singing.* We repeat some songs month to month. "Praise Ye the Lord," with its up and down movements and loudness, is our classic opener. We always have some action songs plus some songs to tie in with the theme. At the end of this past year, we did a reprise of many songs learned during the year. We use a flip chart in front, which records our repertoire.
 - C. *A story.* This is often a very simple retelling of a biblical story employing any of the following: a visual aid like a story board or flannel board, actors, representative figures on the floor, or someone telling their own story (as when two people talked about their family experiences of advent wreaths or of Hanukkah candles).
 - D. *Response.* We invite a response to the story, such as an activity, art or craft work, or something verbal. Most times options are offered.
 - E. *An introduction to open worship time.* After a couple of daunting experiences using long, here's-how-you-might-think-about-it introductions, the introduction is kept short and as physical as possible. A rug to sit on in the center, a small chest where a candle is set and lit, and dimming the lights, together form the continuity of experience.
 - F. *Unprogrammed worship.* This may be fairly brief, something between ten and twenty minutes. Sometimes there is verbal guidance. The point has not been to make the time longer (though that would/could be a worthy goal), but to develop a sense of a worshipping space that we're all in together. (Often the youngest end up being taken out by parents when they get chatty or restless. They have had a time of community and preparation which may yield fruit later in being able to sit longer.)
 - G. *Reflections from worship.* One may need only to ask, "Is there anything someone would like to share from their experience?" Attention is hard to get for this, however, since the children are usually ready to jump up from their places as soon as we begin shaking hands at rise of meeting.
 - H. *Announcements and snack as service opportunity.* A snack provides an opportunity for children to be of service passing food around. Children are also asked to help at other times when something needs handing out for the program.

Should you decide to do a similar program, I offer these tips:

1. Share information: Post the agenda and refer to it each time. Send mailers to families. This helps newcomers and creates the security of repetition for the children.
2. Use singing.
 - a) Use song posters, not sheets or books. We're all looking up at the same thing, thus the song leader gets our eyes.
 - b) Repeat songs and use some action songs. These facilitate learning and understanding, especially for the youngest ones.
 - c) Think about singing--self expression within a structure, unity, harmony, emotional connection, relationship to theme. Allow the music to help you; the mood of a song can help with the transition to the next portion of the program.

- d) Don't be afraid to clap or cheer (often a spontaneous response to a rousing song). We can express our reactions.

3. Create a physical environment that makes quiet worship time special.

- a) Allow kids to sit on the floor. Remember that on chairs they usually can't reach the floor with their feet and so are "ungrounded." This is where children play. Consider the earth as a reliable foundation, a place to make a connection. Make the floor space special with a rug and give the children a worship posture to facilitate centering down. We explain to the children, "If you sit on the floor, it's with your bottom on the floor, legs crossed, not touching anyone unless you're with your parent." This choice gives freedom while serving to remind the children that this is not ordinary time or space. One of our hopes is that the children will develop an appreciation of how discipline can be helpful in arriving at a spiritual goal.
- b) Light a candle--the light of Christ, the light of God, inside and outside us. You can close your eyes and it's still there.
- c) Dim the lights in the room. This creates intimacy and cuts down on outside stimulation and distractions. It also gives a visual clue to slow down and be contemplative, and can be an invitation to try to see with "different eyes."

See Appendix A for a discussion of the use of symbols in family worship.

4. Welcome the arts, inviting responding without words. Use pictures and symbols. Consider self expression as part of the holy. Offering options increases the sense of freedom. Think about appealing to all the senses and what different forms response to a story can take.

5. Have no one segment longer than 15 minutes and provide stretch breaks. Respect attention spans and remember that young bodies need to move.

6. Invite adults who are not parents to be present. Children are usually expected to adjust to adult environments, but in family worship the adults are given opportunities to make any necessary adjustments. Entering into one another's environments is a sign of love and caring. Can we be open to it, even if it means compromising the purity of one's worship time?

7. Prepare as thoroughly as possible. Work out a detailed outline. Practice saying everything. Check times allotted to each activity to see how it all fits in the allotted time. Share the outline with your team.

8. Strive to develop a team, a few as the core group, some just for a particular task. Look for a variety of people of different ages and gender to present. Find ways to let kids volunteer. Be somewhat realistic about what people can take on. I have always felt it ideal to have some "regulars" greet people at the door, but parents with children often don't arrive until the last minute or later.

9. Don't expect consistent success, either from your ideas or from the response. Kids' responsiveness varies. Sometimes they're cooperative and fully engaged, and some days they're "off"

and nothing seems to work. Kids tend to be more expressive of their inward state than adults. This comes with the territory. Don't let one negative experience with a child give you anxiety. Work on relationships, finding things to praise, looking for the kinds of activities that children will most enjoy. Don't let a "heckler" throw you off course. Think about ways that the more active children might work off a little energy before entering the room.

10. Work the program. Expect a shakedown cruise. People will be anxious at first--including you, the facilitator--and that will likely make people antsy, cross, or confrontational. Don't take it personally. Try to ask for feedback and use it for future planning, with a healthy dose of evaluation on your part for whether it improves the experience.

11. Get input, especially from parents. How was this experience for them? How was it for their child? What kinds of activities does their child enjoy the most? Let parents know how they can develop more worship skills at home.

12. Get help. Go to Ministry and Counsel (or similar committee) to report and ask for advice. Make sure there's prayer support from them, both in meetings and from committee representatives in worship with you. Personally ask good prayers that you know to come to worship. And, of course, pray yourself! Divine guidance is essential.

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