



NEWS FROM LYNNE PABST



Our Certified Christian Educator and POINT Partner



Children, Worship and Worship Bags



Thirty-three years ago as my husband and I packed up to go to Sunday worship we armed ourselves with everything we needed -- he with his briefcase containing sermon, Bible, liturgy, service notes and visitation list and I with my canvas bag of items to guide our 1-year-old and 6-year-old through an hour of worship. The norm for sanctuaries at that time was to have no worship bags or children's bulletins. In fact, in the first churches served, my husband was introducing the concept of including children in worship and a children's sermon. Our children were often the only children in worship.



What was in that canvas bag? Well, of course, there was a non-messy snack like cheerios or raisins, sometimes they were eaten and sometimes not, a simple Bible jigsaw puzzle, a Bible book, a pen or crayons and paper. My one child from the day he could hold a paper and pencil was content finding letters/words/names in the adult bulletin or making believe he was taking notes on what his father was saying. Through this the language of worship was learned.



My other child was much more interested in watching everyone and moving to the music and rhythm of the words. This alone kept her busy most of the time but when she needed a puzzle or pencil and paper it was there as well. Through her bouncing on my lap and watching everyone move, the rhythm, movement and feeling of worship was learned. While no longer needing worship bags, they still engage in worship on these two different levels. Each child is different, so worship bags and their use need to meet those individual characteristics and all characteristics are welcomed in worship.



By early 2020 worship bags had become a standard in many sanctuaries and frazzled parents do not need to bring things from home. Very frazzled parents could opt for childcare. As with most of our lives COVID 19 has interrupted this practice. Since we constantly are getting conflicting information on how long the virus actually stays on surfaces and because of the nature of child behavior, as churches consider re-entry, it is recommended that re-useable worship bags and excess paper be removed from the sanctuary. Some churches are even considering no bulletins and no childcare for the beginning phases of re-entry. What then are the options to continued engagement of children in worship?



1. Replace the re-useable Worship bags with completely disposable ones. While an option probably not the best because it can get expensive, not very environmentally friendly, and still someone needs to clean them up and dispose of them.



2. Require families to bring their own worship bags and take them home with them each week. No one else but the family touches the bag. This may be a challenge because the church has supplied them for so long parents may not know what to include in a





worship bag. (At the end of this article are some helps for creating effective worship bags.)



3. Replacing the children's sermon with several interactive worship rhythms which engage children throughout the service. What does this look like? Instead of just a one shot 5-minute children's sermon, create three interactions, one during each of the three rhythms of worship (Preparing for, Receiving and Responding to the Word). This might look like an action song of praise, a dramatic presentation of scripture, and an echo prayer. When children are waiting for the next time they can interact, they will attend more in between.



While it may seem as though COVID 19 has thrown us another curve ball, instead we can see it as another opportunity to make worship more inclusive of all ages and to support families in fulfilling vows taken at their child's Baptism.



Worship Bags From Home



This is a great opportunity because parents can individualize to their child's interests, developmental level and needs. The bag can be changed week to week as the child develops and matures in faith. Whether the worship bag is made by the church or gathered in the home, it must be remembered that **the goal of the contents of the bag is to point the child toward worship** not simply occupy their time in worship. This goal continues as the child ages. Often once the child becomes an avid reader parents are tempted to send a chapter book or an ipad with the child. If these texts do not relate to the worship theme, they actually take the child's attention from worship and soon the child learns to block out what is happening in worship. The wise choice of items is important.



General helps:

- Canvas/cloth bags are better than plastic/vinyl as they are soft and do not make a rustling noise.
- Bags and toys without Velcro are quieter.
- Toys which do not make noise are good choices.
- Toys which relate to the worship theme are best.
- Cardboard backed jigsaw puzzles or board books are useful, again relate them to worship.
- Finger food in a container which easily can be handled by child alone.
- Crayons and pens make less noise than pencils.
- Items which relate to the service or scripture topic are helpful.



Pastor Helps:

If the pastor can be encouraged to announce the scripture or theme for the upcoming service on the Monday before, it can be extremely helpful to parents who are trying to develop worship bags from home.





If the pastor can work toward option 3 above on worship development, children and parents will rely less on the worship bag and participate more in worship.



Possible Worship Bag Items:



While crayons, puzzles, small pad of paper and cheerios are staples in any worship bag, here are some age appropriate suggestions.



Age Group	Possible Items
Birth-6 months	The diaper bag is the biggest help. This age if basic needs are tended to before and after the service they often sleep through the service.
6-12 months	Favorite soft items to manipulate are helpful along with a comfortable adult lap.
1-2 years	Board books and being allowed to stand on the pew to see what is going on is helpful.
2-3 years	Items which aid the child in imitating worship – a book to be a hymnal or a Bible. A folded piece of paper or the actual bulletin.
3-5 years	A pew buddy which the child can teach how to worship. This pew buddy may be a doll or a stuffed animal. The child will feel empowered as they teach their pew buddy how to worship. Bookmarks to mark hymns for the service.
5 and up	The bulletin and a pen should suffice as they should be paying more attention to the service itself. On the adult bulletin, the child can check off the elements of worship as the congregation progresses through them. You can still use the hymn markers from the younger age. The child can look for words or letters they know and circle them. At this age, the child should be fully engaged in worship being encouraged to find hymn numbers and stand to sing, etc. leaving little time for other activity. Some churches provide Children’s Bulletins on the scripture topic for these ages.



Worship and Worship Bag Interactions:



The worship bag is a **helper to the adult in guiding the child in worship**. What is even more important than what is in the bag is **what is done with the bag**. If the adult’s attitude is “Here is your worship bag go sit in the pew and be quiet.”, the child is not being led to worship. If the adult offers supportive interactions throughout the worship service using the items in the bag then the child is being nurtured toward worship.



Here are a few positive scenarios:



2-year-old who wants to imitate what the people are doing in worship.



Some parent supports: Help child hold hymnal. Help child stand during hymns and bow head during prayers.



3-year-old with a pew buddy and parent in worship.



Some parent words: Where do you and your pew buddy want to sit? Do you think pew buddy will be able to see from there? That’s a good choice. Let’s help pew buddy find the first hymn. (Service starts, quietly sitting) Help pew buddy pray now. Let’s help pew buddy sing the hymn.



5-year-old with pen and paper in worship:





Some parent words: Here is your bulletin, do you recognize any words in it? Listen for these words (Parent writes them for child.) As you listen to the scripture draw a picture to go with it.



Worship is a collective activity of the people of God and an expression of our common life and ministry. It demands the full, conscious, and active participation of the whole body of Christ, with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Children and youth bring special gifts and grow in their faith through their regular participation in worship. Those who plan and lead worship should provide for their full participation in the Service for the Lord's Day.



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Blessings – Enjoy worship with children!

