

God's commitment to and desire for children to be an integral part of the community of faith is evident from the earliest practices of the Jewish and Christian traditions. The first nine verses of Deuteronomy make clear that children are included in the household of God and the "handing down of faith" is intergenerational. The Passover liturgy centers children as the main inquirers of each aspect of the ritual. Jewish Midrash tells of Israel standing before The Holy One to receive the Torah. The requirement for receiving the Torah is "good guarantors." After Israel offers a host of possibilities, it is only upon the presentation of "our children" that the Holy One gives the Torah with the proclamation, "They are certainly good guarantors. For their sake, I give you the Torah."<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising that Jesus, steeped in his own tradition, invites, welcomes, blesses, holds, and engages children in ministry.<sup>2</sup> The disciples, like many of us, prioritize adult needs and seek to send children away from the center of our faith. Jesus rebukes the disciples and, in a rare sanction captured in Matthew 18, even warns of dire consequences for causing a "little one" to stumble. Jesus invites a young boy into common ministry as he uses the young one's gifts to feed a crowd. Jesus' witness is the incarnation of God's inclusion and value of children. Artist renderings of these stories of Jesus and the children lean toward sweet and whimsical. What they do not convey is the radical act of hospitality and countercultural proclamation that the very act of Jesus holding a child depicted in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Children in that time and place were not automatically a part of the family upon birth. Unless the father picked the child up within the first ten days of their lives, children may not be considered a part of the family<sup>3</sup>. Thus, when Jesus takes children in his arms, most well past the ten-day window, he proclaims that these little ones are a part of his family.

We who dare to emulate Jesus take children in our arms around the font and baptize them in the name of the Triune God, so too welcoming children into the family of faith. Vows are required not only for the parents to raise the children to know, love, and serve the Lord but also for the congregation on behalf of the Church Universal. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, these vows bind us to one another even as they engraft the newly baptized into the body of Christ and a covenant community is formed. Even denominations who do not practice infant baptism have rituals of baby dedication and make promises to nurture the faith of children. It is from the font that we begin our Christian life. There is no waiting period until a child is old or mature enough to follow Jesus. Francis Thompson wrote, "Know you what it is to be a child? ... It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marian Wright Edelman, *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations for Loving and Working for Children*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18:1-6, 19:13-14; Mark 9:36-37, 10:13-16; Luke 18: 15-17; John 6:1-13.

<sup>3</sup> While practice of *Tollere liberum* has been traditionally accepted by scholars there are those who challenge it.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Thompson, "Shelley," *The Works of Francis Thompson*, vol. 3, pp. 7-8 (1913).

Faithful living streams from the font in each child, enlivened by the Spirit, and sustained through worship, prayer, and the Lord's Supper. We, the parents, the child, and the congregation, spend our common lives living into and from our baptismal promises.

These communal commitments shape the way in which we are to embody and practice faith personally and collectively. We were created to worship God. Worship is where the Creator and creature meet. Prayer and the arts become a channel through which the Holy Spirit can bridge the space. Prayer animates worship and connects us with the Holy One. It is the means through which we communicate with God, speaking and listening, as we praise, offer thanks, confess our propensity to rebel, ask for that which we and others need to live lives worthy of the gift of Jesus Christ. The arts move us beyond mere words and into the creative nature of the Divine. The arts "make vivid"<sup>5</sup> what the limitations of words may veil. As it was with the earliest practices of God's family, children are a vital part of these sacred and profound experiences and we, like our forebears in faith, are to welcome children and nurture their faith through worship and prayer. It is through the communal experience and movements of worship and its prayer that children learn to model their personal prayers and structure worshipful living. Church, in general and worship in particular, is one of the few remaining places, beyond our families, where we gather intergenerationally.

Yet, the Church, as with those earliest disciples, has a propensity to limit the access of children to worship and the sacraments. Until the late 1970s, at least in the Presbyterian tradition, children could not take communion. Once that was set aside by an overture and vote of its highest governing body, baptized children were welcome to the Lord's Table with intentional education on worship and the sacraments offered by the congregation. This led to greater numbers of children present in worship and a significant buildup of resources to help children understand and participate in communion. Sadly, within ten years, arguments in seminary classrooms, particularly in worship and education classes, emerged with many supporting the development of a separate "child friendly worship" that would send children out of the heartbeat of a congregation and once again segregate them from the community's central practice. It would be several years before Zero to Three's<sup>6</sup> information on brain research, and the importance of certain experiences during the first three years of life for future brain and spiritual development, would make its way into the hands of church leadership. John Westerhoff, III and Gwen Neville's *Learning through Liturgy*<sup>7</sup> stands as a precursor to Dawn Rundman's discussion of the impact of language on faith development<sup>8</sup>

The church is now experiencing the results of 30 years of not tending to children's faith in worship and little exposure to corporate prayer life. While most of the excellent

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<sup>5</sup> See Elliot Eisner's Ten Lessons the Arts Teach. <https://www.arteducators.org/advocacy-policy/articles/116-10-lessons-the-arts-teach>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.zerotothree.org/>

<sup>7</sup> Gwen Kennedy Neville and John H. Westerhoff, III, *Learning through Liturgy*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Dawn Rundman *Little Steps, Big Faith: How the Science of Early Childhood Development Can Help You Grow Your Child's Faith*, (Minneapolis, MN: Beaming Books, 2018).

resources, written in the early days of children's inclusion in worship, are still around, they are out of date with a few even long forgotten. Some congregations held fast to the benefit and practice of including children in worship. They stand in the breach, in the face of resistance, offering worship enrichment bags that too often were more time-filling rather than experience-enhancing. Some pastors and educators do their best to provide children's sermons, but most had little training or assistance from their theological education or mainline resources.

Over the span of the last year, in gatherings of pastors (Solo Pastors in small and medium churches, Heads of Staff in large churches,) educators, commissioned lay pastors, congregational leaders, parents and children were engaged in intentional conversations regarding children and worship. A clear pattern emerged with a consistent request for assistance in this area. Church professionals asked for updated and new resources to help their congregations, its governing bodies, and parents know why including children in worship and prayer is important. Congregational leaders specifically asked about best practices, well-articulated and accessible foundational material to educate well-intentioned disciples on why this is important. Parents and church professionals indicated a deep need to know they were not alone in their struggles with, "what to do with wiggly children in worship and frustrated adults who would rather not be distracted." Pastors confessed they were not prepared to preach a sermon that spoke to children while also attending to, "our primary audience - adults." This statement underscored a deeper concern about worshippers being stratified as primary and secondary. Many parents spoke longingly of, "just one hour of quiet and rest where they could concentrate and connect with God." They yearned for a sabbath of their own. When talking with children, they described worship and "big church" as the "place where big, big prayers are prayed," where you went, "so you didn't have to read the bible," and of their wish that worship was "a little more user friendly, maybe with manipulatives and stuff."<sup>9</sup> While the church may be one of the last remaining public places of intergenerational gatherings, its practices speak more multigenerationally. Adults of varying generations may be present and share a pew with youth and children. However, the meaningful engagement, deep listening, and valuing of one another's contributions and wisdom that is necessary for intergenerational ministry is not present. Children's contribution and the enrichment their presence brings to worship and prayer is largely unacknowledged.

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<sup>9</sup> Manipulatives, in an educational setting, are physical, hands-on items learners work with to reinforce or learn skills and concepts (e.g., wooden puzzles, pattern blocks, color counting chips). This grant will explore the way art might be used to enhance the worship experience of children non-related items.

<sup>10</sup> Holly C. Allen and Jason B. Santos, (2020). Intergenerational Ministry—a Forty-year Perspective: 1980-2020. *Christian Education Journal*, 17(3), 506-529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891320949558>

<sup>11</sup> Howard Vanderdale, ed., *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshipping Together* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008), II.

<sup>12</sup> Holly C. Allen, Christine Lawton, and Cory L. Seibel, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023), 171.

A focus on intergenerational ministry is experiencing a resurgence of interest after many years of emphasis on separating by age and stage.<sup>10</sup> In the 1980s the Presbyterian School of Christian Education incorporated intergenerational ministry in its educational endeavors even as it attended to age and stage. Following the public-school system's lead, congregations gravitated to segregating ministries according to age. Unwittingly, this aided those who argued to send children out of worship. Intergenerational worship, "people of every age are understood to be equally important,"<sup>11</sup> and how to intentionally craft and lead it, was not cultivated in theological education or in congregational practices. The case for intergenerational ministry has more recently been led by Holly Allen, retired professor from Abilene Christian and Lipscomb Universities (Church of Christ), GenOn Ministries (formerly Logos), and InterGenerate. All are advocating for an intergenerational church where, "leaders seek ways to increase the levels of mutuality and reciprocity across generations and encourage the generations toward accommodating one another."<sup>12</sup>

Generational influences contribute significantly, but not exclusively, to the development of children's faith.<sup>13</sup> Christian Smith's recent research<sup>14</sup> on the impact of families on forming lifelong faith builds on the work of Vern Bengtson.<sup>15</sup> Both powerfully articulate that which the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted, the church has long said "parents are the primary faith educators" but the church has not lived into its responsibilities to support and equip parents in the crucial aspect of parenting. Their work recalled the findings of the Search Institute's study in 1990<sup>16</sup>, which heralded the significance of lifelong involvement of families in worship and Christian education as a common factor in the development of mature faith.

It is into this fierce and urgent moment that the Lilly Endowment's Nurturing Children's Faith through Worship and Prayer Initiative enters to strengthen congregations and families in their baptismal responsibilities and recognize the unique and important witness the church must contribute to intergenerational engagement.

### **Purpose**

The vows we take at the font compel us to partner with congregations, parents, and this Lilly Initiative to become a more welcoming worshipping community and to nurture the faith of children through worship and prayer. Union Presbyterian Seminary and the Center for Excellence in Christian Education are proposing a multi-phased and multi-faceted approach that identifies and equips primary stakeholders and constituencies in nurturing children's faith through worship and prayer.

The Font & Faith initiative seeks to help the church live into the promises made in baptism by

- providing occasions for critical and sustaining conversations,
- creating supporting communities on a common journey,
- researching, developing, and offering resources to strengthen family and congregational ministries that nurture children in worship and prayer,

so that children's faith and congregations' worship and prayer life are engaged, enriched, and enlivened.