

A number of years ago the Session and congregation of Fairmount Presbyterian Church engaged in a visioning process that identified priorities and possibilities for ministry that would help carry this family of faith to its centennial celebration. These conversations were guided by the understandings that individual members access God in different ways and that the congregation is responsible for deepening and widening Fairmount's spiritual reach. As a result of Vision 100, the Session created the Faith Formation Council (FFC) to oversee member education and help encourage and promote more faith forming ministries within the life of the church. The FFC has been intentional about strengthening our ministries with families, youth and children by seeking more intentional ways to build on Fairmount's commitment to diversity and including children and families more actively in our worshipping life.

This commitment to children and families has been demonstrated by members, pastors and the Session of the Fairmount Presbyterian Church family who began including a "Children's Message" in worship. In following years similar support moved us into our current "Family Worship Sunday" model.

Concerned about the spiritual lives of our children and their families the FFC has been praying and reading about children's involvement in Worship and Christian Education. From our readings and prayer we have become convicted that children belong in Worship and in Christian Education. To that end we are proposing the following:

PROPOSAL:

Consistent with our constitutional duties and theology, the Faith Formation Council proposes that Session intentionally encourage children, youth, and adults to be present and to participate fully in worship and educational ministries by creating a Christian Education hour which falls between the two morning services starting in the Fall of 2010.

BIBLICAL & THEOLOGICAL RATIONALEⁱ

Worship is the central act of the gathered community of God. Scripture tells us that in response to God's goodness all of God's people gather to offer prayers and praise. Peoples of every age, race and nationality make up the body of Christ.

"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make God's face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you."
Psalm 67:1-3

"People were bringing even infants to Jesus that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs'"
Luke 18:15-16

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Creator of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

Eph 4:4-6

When worship happens in the fellowship of faith, it becomes a celebration of belonging to and participating in that community. However, our Worship is not just another activity to fill our time nor is it a social club. It is an important opportunity for us to gather and give Glory to God as we are shaped by the Word of God proclaimed and enacted. Hence the reason we feel so strongly that children ought to be included in our worship. We want our children (and all of our members) to grow up feeling loved and cared for by God and God’s worshipping community, to experience how important it is for us to be together to praise our living God and to be shaped by the word of God and the traditions of Worship from the earliest age.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

At the heart of the church's life is our worship of God. It is something the people of God do in response to God and God’s acts of grace and love. Through worship we, the children of God, regardless of age, attend to the presence of God in our lives. The act of worship reflects and shapes a community’s faith. Worship expresses our praise of God and enacts our relationship with God and one another. The central nature of worship does not change with the age of the person involved. All that we do beyond worship – teaching, serving the poor, gathering in small groups, fellowship – arises from our encounter with the living God in worship. It is in worship that we take part in life giving and identity forming practices. We gather at table to share the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation which feed us and form us into the Body of Christ. We gather around the baptismal font to remember who we are and whose we are as we baptize children and adults in response to God’s commandments. In baptism God has made promises to love and nurture all God’s children and to remember them in the covenant. In response to this good news we make promises at every baptism:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ ordered us to teach those who are baptized. Do you the people of the church, promise to tell this child the Good News of the Gospel, support his/her family in their nurture of him/her, and, by your fellowship, strengthen their family ties with the household of God?”

We make promises to tell the newly baptized the Good News, to nurture his/her faith and to strengthen his/her ties to the household of God. All of this takes place in and is fed by our worship of God. In short, our worship forms our identity as people of God.

Worship is not the work of God or the worship leaders, but the work of the people. Every person, regardless of age, “participates his or her way into the faith community.” We are shaped by the liturgy whether we know it or not; it (our liturgy and the movement of God) washes over us and shapes our understandings of who God is and who God calls us to be.

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Ephesians 2:19-22

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

Ephesians 4:15-16

Noted theologian and preacher, William Sloane Coffin says, “Worship is the offering to God of the entire congregation of God’s people, and children should certainly be included. A childless congregation presents an abnormal and unpromising appearance.”

CONSTITUTIONAL RATIONALE

The Directory for Worship, part of our PC (USA) Book of Order, clearly supports and advocates for the inclusion of children in worship, asserting that we are the royal priesthood and because of this fact we shall not exclude anyone.

“In Jesus Christ, the Church is a royal priesthood in which worship is the work of everyone. The people of God are called to participate in the common ministry of worship. No one shall be excluded from participation or leadership in public worship in the Lord’s house on the grounds of race, color, class, age, sex, or handicapping condition. In a particular church, the session is to provide for worship and shall encourage the people to participate fully and regularly in it.”

W-1.4003

Children learn to value corporate worship only by being a part of inclusive worship on a regular basis. We know that children learn by doing and by modeling the behaviors, attitudes and feelings for their parents and other significant adults. Understanding this developmental reality; our Directory for Worship includes the following passages to help guide and shape our denominations worship habits.

“Children bring special gifts to worship and grow in the faith through their regular inclusion and participation in the worship of the congregation. Those responsible for planning and leading the participation of children in worship should consider the children’s level of understanding and ability to respond, and should avoid both excessive formality and condescension. The session should ensure that regular programs of the church do not prevent children’s full participation with the whole congregation in worship, in Word and Sacrament, on the Lord’s Day.”

W-3.1004

“In setting an order for worship on the Lord’s Day, the pastor with the concurrence of the session shall provide opportunity for the people from youngest to oldest to participate in a worthy offering of praise to God and for them to hear and to respond to God’s Word.”

W-3.3201

“The central occasion for nurture in the church is the Service for the Lord’s Day, when the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments are celebrated. All members of the community, from oldest to youngest, are encouraged to be present and to participate. Educational activities should not be scheduled which prevent regular participation in this service”

W-6.2006

The parent(s) or the one(s) exercising parental responsibility should teach their children about Christian worship by example, by providing for household worship, and by discussion and instruction.

W-5.7002

Developmental/ Faith Formation Rationale

Through the years research has shown us that children develop, physically, emotionally and intellectually, through social interactions and relationships. It has been demonstrated that children develop spiritually in the same way. The body of Christ is integral to this development. While we acknowledge, support and advocate for the powerful role families play in the spiritual lives of children, our tradition acknowledges that the community surrounding the children and their families play a crucial role as well. Our baptismal practices are shaped by this understanding. Maria Harris reminds us that community is the starting point in educational ministry. “Only out of life together as a people do patterns of worship or programs for teaching make sense.”ⁱⁱ

When it comes to human development, imitation is crucial for children to adapt and learn. The same is true for our spiritual development. From the earliest age children participate their way into faith by imitating parents and other important worshipping adults. Gradually each child makes sense of worship and its role in his/her life by modeling their own faith and practices on the example given to them by the adults around them.

As children grow, they are constantly testing the boundaries of their identity. In worship we help our children sense and explore her/his identity as children of God. Worship is the primary time when our identity as the people of God is formed. It is the time when the church passes on its theology and its traditions. While our children might not be able to explain the theology, we know that their identity is being shaped by the rituals, traditions and language they hear on a weekly basis. Research has proven that the experiences people have as children eventually will contribute to their behavior as adults. If children develop a sense of belonging with the family of faith, they will be more likely to want to maintain and possibly increase their relationship and identity with God.

When congregations delay the entrance of children into the full worshipping life of the congregation until the 7th grade we are asking a lot from our young people. We are asking them to go against the developmental phase most 7th graders are currently enjoying. It is a phase marked by a need to begin separating from their parents and their parent's traditions. It is also a time when most adolescents are really beginning to question their identity and their role in the life of his/her family and circle of friends. This is a natural part of a young person's development. If young people have not developed a sense of belonging in the worshipping community and have not found a level of personal meaning in the patterns of worship by now, we are potentially making this transition unnecessarily difficult for our young people and their parents, creating more opportunities for family strife or decreased worship participation by parents who don't want to fight with unwilling teenagers.

By their nature children have much to offer to the community of faith. Among other things they are a physical reminder of the promises we make at baptism, they bring a spontaneity which breathes life into the body, they offer an ability to see things as they really are and they bring a willingness to ask questions that make us all think.

Adult Education Possibilities

Parents/Caregivers are the primary faith shapers of children. The reality is a caregiver has more opportunities for educating his/her child in the life of the Christian faith than church school teachers do in one hour per week. Unfortunately most parents feel ill-equipped to talk about questions of faith with their children. The creation of an education hour between the two services will create more opportunities for parents to grow into their role as their children's primary faith educator.

Of course we recognize that Faith Formation really only becomes possible when the need for learning and nurture is acknowledged as a lifelong commitment. The broader audience for the proposed education hour will encourage this understanding and allow us to attract more adult participants as well as offer more opportunities on Sunday mornings for spiritual nurture and support.

CONSIDERATIONS

- If the Proposal is approved, we recommend the creation of a Transition Task Force comprised of members from the Worship Council, Faith Formation Council, Children's and Families Ministries, Youth Committee, Adult Education, Music Program and the Deacons. They should be charged with a two fold job:
 - Provide education for parents, children and our other members about this change: why this transition is taking place, when it will be taking place and practical tools to help adults and children worship together. This should include intentional education for parents, children and members in general about worship and its place in the life of the community.
 - They should also be charged with working out details of the Sunday morning schedule.
 - This group will make reports and recommendations relating to the implementation of the approved proposal to the Session.

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ⁱⁱ Harris, Maria. Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church. Westminster John Knox Press