



Mennonite
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Transforming Worship...
...With the Children's Story!



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For additional resources check the Resource Centre subject headings

[Worship–Children–Children’s Story](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/127) at the following link:
www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/127

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Endnotes

1 Joyce Ann Mercer, Deborah L. Matthews, and Scott Walz, “Children in Congregations,” in *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2004, 251.

2 Mercer et al, 261.

- Present reflective questions that help children worship, internalize and respond to the Biblical theme of the story. Provide a pause of ten seconds or so after each question, so that children can ponder it in their hearts.
- If children distract others, remind them gently that this is a special time for focusing on God, and not on them. (Children under 4 years of age should have a caregiver come forward with them to help them remain settled.) Refocus on the story as quickly as possible.
- If the story gets interrupted by “off topic” comments, receive them kindly and thankfully and then continue with the story.
- Finish with a brief prayer of thanksgiving for this time with God and the children.

Other Children's Time Options

Be creative and provide variety for the Children's time. Rather than always telling a story, consider one of the excellent 'secular' Children's picture books that often express the worship theme well. If that is your choice, reflect on and share how you see that theme illustrated in the book with the children.

Or, do an interview with someone in church, do some sketching, use music, drama, movement, etc. Invite artists, writers, musicians, dancers to tell a story that links with their gifts.

The children's story time provides a unique opportunity to honour the different ways we find and make meaning and connect with God's intentions for our world. Using it well can make the children's time a transformative element in the worship life of your congregation.

Transforming Worship...with the Children's Story

Many worship leaders wonder about the place and purpose of the children's story. The transparent honesty and spontaneity of the children in this public worship setting can be a blessing, but it can also be a source of amusement and occasionally embarrassment for adults. But what does it do for the children? Is it the part of worship that helps younger children understand the substance of the worship theme? Can it facilitate an encounter with God? Or is it a worship component, as some critics of children's stories suggest, that puts children on display for adult gratification? At a recent conference on children's spirituality, this negative attitude was expressed by saying that children's story time in worship “operates implicitly to marginalize or exclude children by segregating them from the worshiping community as a whole and trivializing their ways of knowing through moralisms.”¹ But the children's story was also recognized as an important way of making the presence of children, who are not easily seen between the pews because of their size, visible, thereby reminding the adults of their presence in the church family.² Since there is such a lively debate about this among Christian educators and other leaders in children's ministry, it should not surprise us if worship leaders in our congregations have mixed feelings about this part of the worship service.

Current research into the spirituality of children is also providing new evidence of the deep and authentic ways that young children can experience God and respond to God's good news when they can engage faith at their level. If our children's story time can support such encounters between the church's children and God, then that worship component is certainly worth taking seriously. Perhaps it can become a modern re-enactment of Jesus taking the children on his lap and blessing them.

If the children's story is that part of the worship service where we focus on children as an integral part of the worshiping family of God, we will use it to invite children to open their hearts and wills to the loving heart and will and story of God. The clear communication strategies we use to connect well with children also help many adults to worship more fully. When we find effective connectors to the message of the biblical texts for children, adults can often the message to their own experiences as well.

Finding Children's Story Resources

Since the summer of 2004, Mennonite Church Canada has guided the writing of Children's stories on the theme of the Lectionary Gospel Text for Ordinary Time. The magazine, *Leader: Equipping the Missional Congregation* (Mennonite Publishing Network) provides children's features for Sundays in the church's high seasons of Advent, Lent and Easter to Pentecost. Both resources provide a great place to start planning your children's time and are available at www.mennonite-church.ca/tiny/126.

Some people adapt these stories to their specific setting, while others are happy to use them as they appear. Even if you are not following the Lectionary, browsing through the catalogue of stories often provides a suitable point of departure.

But, perhaps you need a different focus or theme. While there are wonderful books of children's Bible stories, children's sermons and stories that can be used (**a link for such resources appears at the end of this brochure**), a good story that comes from within the storyteller also provides a powerful ministry to the young and not so young. Here are some things to keep in mind if you choose to develop your own children's story.

Preparing the story:

- Remember that you are emulating Jesus, who said "Let the children come to me" (Mark 10:14) took the children on his lap, blessed them, and challenged his disciples to become like them.
- Prepare yourself spiritually. Pray for yourself and the children who will receive your story, trusting God to work through you.
- Gear your story to a 4-8 yr old audience. They are the ones who will not understand most of the other words of worship. Adults benefit from listening in, but this is the bonus rather than the focus. 4-8 year olds are highly visual and tactile, and long to be reminded of God's unconditional love for and acceptance of them.
- Keep your story short. Practice it. Try to tell it in about 5 minutes.
- Use simple vocabulary that links to their experiences.
- Connect the theme of the Bible passages to the current context of children in a concrete way.

- Stick to one main point and image (A concrete object or symbol can be helpful.)
- Share the good news of the passage without moralizing. For example, if a story character responds in a Christ like way, we can show our affirmation of that response without saying, "This is what Jesus thinks we should always do." If the point really needs to be underscored it is better to say something like, "I wonder if that made Jesus smile."
- Plan a few reflective questions that help children worship and internalize the Biblical message. Reflective questions encourage children to wonder about the signs of God at work in the story, and help children identify and claim God's presence in their lives as well. They move from a story focus to a personal response opportunity. In the short example just cited, an internalizing personal response question would be, "I wonder how each of us could make Jesus smile today."

Tips for all Storytellers for Presenting the Story

Honour the children as spiritual beings. As the storyteller, be conscious of the sacred function you are serving, just as you were during the preparation, still trusting God to work through you.

- Take time to settle. Ask the children if they are comfortable and ready to listen to this message from God to them. You may find it helpful to remind them that Jesus invited the children onto his lap, that he appreciated and blessed children, and that Jesus still wants to bless them during this special worship time. A short prayer to open the story can be helpful for this.
- Make eye contact with each child. (your eyes speak at least as much as your voice and gestures.)
- Follow a predictable pattern of gathering, listening, telling and departing. This enhances the worship experience for children, whether in a special season, or throughout the year.
- Tell the story from your heart. Enter into the story with all your presence and attention. This is easier to do if you have practiced. If you are using props, practice in front of a mirror.
- Let the story do its own teaching and resist explaining its lesson. If you present the story well, the children will hear and reflect on God's voice rather than yours.