



Using Hymns in All-Age Worship

Short Guide No 13: Using Hymns in All-Age Worship

Some services are designated as 'all-age'. What does this imply? Ideally, all worship should be suitable for everyone in a worshipping community. 'Our Father' should mean what it says, without alienating people because of their age or cultural background. So, the term 'all-age' usually means a service for both adults and children, with a special emphasis on families.

The potential of all-age worship

Content is determined by local and denominational conventions. One church might have an informal All-age Morning Worship Service whereas the service at a neighbouring church could be an 'All-age Parish Communion'. Music will usually feature in both services, so how can the singing of hymns and songs enhance and not hinder worship? There are no easy answers, but there must be an attempt at a realistic assessment of expectations and needs.

Catering for children

Is the solution to choose everything to appeal to 'children'? Such an approach needs to be thought through. There are children who relish singing 'substantial, co-eternal', without necessarily understanding the complexity of the language; there are others who have little or no experience of singing in a formal, church setting; there are some whose attention span is limited and who can never concentrate long enough to read several stanzas of text, either in a book or on a screen. There is the world of difference between a three-year-old and a thirteen-year-old.

Catering for adults

Among adults there is a similar range of understanding and experience. Some adults have a lifetime of singing the hymns of their own religious tradition; there are those whose experience largely reflects what they remember from their own childhood; and still others whose acquaintance with sacred song reflects what they have learnt via contemporary Christian media. There is potentially, then, great diversity in an 'all-age' congregation!

Some guiding principles

- Nothing should be sung which cannot, ultimately, give glory to God.
- Nothing should talk down to any members of the congregation, young or old.
- Nothing should cause gratuitous embarrassment.
- All songs and hymns should contribute to the establishment of a community of believers.
- Some items should stimulate movement and actions.
- At least one hymn or song should be immediately relevant to the children in the congregation.
- Not every word needs to be instantly understood by everyone.
- Some sung items should challenge, for churches can be places where we learn to respect and enjoy worship material which might be unfamiliar.

A careful choice and balance of material are essential

- Opening and closing hymns should be confident and leave everyone with a sense of communal and personal involvement in worship: 'I will enter his gates'; Praise and thanksgiving'; 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven'; 'One more step'; 'You shall go out with joy'.
- The remaining hymns should be chosen to reflect particular aspects of the liturgy.
- Some hymns will benefit from a brief word of explanation. What is the meaning of 'Shalom, my friends', or of 'Emmanuel'? Why do we sing 'Holy, holy, holy!' on Trinity Sunday? Who was 'the Angel Gabriel'? Who first sang 'Blessed be the God of Israel'?

Childhood memories – then and now

Some hymns and songs bring back childhood memories for the middle-aged and older members of a congregation: 'Jesus bids us shine'; 'Morning has broken'; 'When a knight won his spurs'.

While these may still appeal to present-day youngsters, it is as well to be aware of current trends. Here are some items chosen by children in our local church primary schools: ‘Author of creation’; ‘Autumn days’; ‘Cross over the road’; ‘He’s got the whole world in his hands’; ‘I, the Lord of sea and sky’; ‘If I were a butterfly!’ (the infants really like this one); ‘King of kings’; ‘Shine, Jesus, shine’; ‘Such love’; ‘Thank you Lord for this new day’; ‘Who put the colours in the rainbow?’.

Action songs

These are the mainstay of many children’s services. Carefully and sympathetically introduced and managed, they can contribute to one’s understanding of religious messages and truths. Percussion instruments can be distributed to children and other members of the congregation, to enhance the meaning and spirit of the text. Examples include ‘The wise man built his house upon the rock’; ‘My God is so big’; ‘God’s not dead, (No), He is alive!’; ‘Jesus’ love is very wonderful’.

Some sources for the choice of material

- ‘Sunday by Sunday’ (RSCM), especially the ‘Songs for Children’ section
- ROOTS Adults and All Age resources for the weekly lectionary
- Indexes of many hymn books
- All-age worship web resources (including links to Messy Church)
- Lists of songs and hymns used in schools attended by children in the congregation
- Suggestions from the various groups making up the worshipping community

Two sample service sheets

(Not all items would necessarily be sung in any one service.)

A Sung Eucharist at which children can receive the sacrament:

Processional: ‘This is the day’

Confession: ‘It’s hard to say “I’m sorry”’ [Joy Webb]

Kyrie: ‘Kyrie eleison’ [Traditional Ukrainian]

Gloria: ‘Glory to God’ [Peruvian Gloria]

Gradual: ‘My God is so big’ [With actions]

Offertory: ‘I, the Lord of sea and sky’

Intercessions: ‘Kum ba yah’

Sanctus: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord’

Lord’s Prayer: ‘Our Father, who art in heaven’
[Caribbean Lord’s Prayer]

Agnus Dei: ‘Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world’ [John Bell]

Communion: ‘Jesus, remember me’ [Taizé]; ‘Let us break bread together on our knees’;

Recessional: ‘We are marching in the light of God’

An all-age Harvest Festival Service which aims to appeal to young and old with a balance between traditional hymns and new songs, encouraging all to think of the deeper meaning of harvest:

‘We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land’ [A fairly traditional opening]

‘The farmer gathers his hay / corn today’ [The chorus is very easy to sing]

‘Thank you, Lord, for this new day / food to eat / clothes to wear’ [With instruments]

‘Think of a world without any flowers’ [Sung during prayers]

‘For the fruits of his creation’ [At the offering]

‘Praise and thanksgiving, Father, we offer’ [A final hymn]

A final thought

How many members of our all-age congregations leave with a song in their hearts? How long do the songs stay with them? Perhaps a lifetime!

Ian Sharp – January 2013 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland
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