**Advent Ideas for… Interactive Worship with Children and Families, Advent Children’s Times & Other Times**

The main focus at our Christmas Eve service (or any of our programs with children) is to make the “Word of God” come alive and be “heard” and “experienced” by those who attend. I think that sometimes, we make our celebrations so complex, that the Bible story gets lost in “cute” and “funny.” Do not be afraid to let the Bible be the center of your Christmas Eve.

The goal is to create a space where the Bible comes alive. I know what you are thinking: “But we don’t want to make it boring.” Let me remind you that the Bible is not boring to children, that beauty is not boring to children and that we can use the Bible and create an atmosphere where the children (and our congregations) are engaged, enjoy the service and experience God at the same time.

Remember, Christmas Eve is a time when visitors (those who may not attend regularly, those children who are only at church because they are at Grandma’s and Grandpa’s house) come to church. Do not miss an opportunity to read the actual Bible text to them and don’t miss a time for them to experience God. It might be the only time they do all year!

* Make sure the actual text is read from the Bible even if it is to be acted out, or read from a story book later.
* Make sure you include a quite reflection time sometime during the event… be still and know God!
* Enjoy the moment… we have everyone together hearing God’s word!
* Simple is good! The more simple you keep things, the less stress for you, the children, families and your congregation. The simpler it is, the less practice time you need which allows families to spend time together and the better able you will be to relax and experience god yourself!

**Below are four ideas:**

1) Including the Children by Engaging Them With Motions to Songs:

Make the service about 15 minutes shorter than usual and teach the children simple motions to the carols that will be sung before you begin.

The children and families will straggle in anyway. While they do, be up front and show them the motions. Then during the service, you can stand up front and do the motions with the children. (See my Youtube about this for more specifics at <https://youtu.be/GdYNu7z3A8k>).

2) The Live Nativity:

As the Lessons and Carols are read or the Christmas Story is told, invite the children to become the nativity by coming forward and taking their place around the manger that you will have already placed in front of the sanctuary. This is certainly not my original idea but why fix what is not broken?

* Invite the children to come to the service dressed as their favorite character from the story. Remind them that a bath towel on your head makes a great costume for nearly every character. However, you should have lots of extra costumes there for visitors so that they can participate as well.
* Or… have costumes there for the children. I would keep this very simple. And as they come in, invite them to choose one to wear and invite them to come forward when the time is right in the story.
* Or… assign parts ahead of time without lines to memorize and rehearsals to happen. Let it be simple, and stress free for you, the children and their parents who won’t have to worry about getting to rehearsals and memorizing lines.
* IMPORTANT: This will be hectic. There will be lots of movement and kids talking etc. No worries. Let it be. And then, after your characters have been put in place, invite the children to be still for one minute. I would probably dim the lights, light a candle, and just be still and let the mystery and wonder of the story speak during the silence. It is always amazing at hoe powerful even one minute of silence can be. “Be still and know that I am God!”

3) Carry in the Nativity Scene With A Twist

This is the same idea as above, except instead of creating a live nativity, you will make one on the altar or table in the front of the sanctuary. The twist is that you will instead of using one nativity set with limited pieces, you will mix nativity sets so that all of the children have a piece to bring forward.

* People have nativity sets they have not used in years. Invite them to donate them to the church (do not borrow them… it will be a nightmare to return them and not loose a character or give them the wrong one).
* It will not matter of the scene matches… what will matter, is that each child had a part.
* PLEASE NOTE for SMALLER CONGREGATIONS: Sometimes you do not have enough children to ever do a live pageant. This is a great way to help your children (or child) experience the joy that being part of the Christmas Play or pageant we all probably remember so fondly.
  + In a very small congregation, you can give a piece to each person who comes and have them lift it up as it is their time to place it in the manger and the have the children (or one child, if that is who is there) can get the pieces from the adults and bring them forward.
  + And… this is super intergenerational… which is the buzz word in the UMC right now… and which is what our smaller congregations do intuitively! Yay for small churches!

4) Invite Children to Read the Scripture

* Children are fascinated by other children. If a child reads, the children will be still and listen!
* One twist on this is to invite parents and their children to read together. The parent would read the actual scripture and the child would summarize in child friendly terms. So for example:
  + The adult reads the actual text: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augutus... .”
  + Then after the adult reads, the child says: “Caesar was like a king he wanted as much as he could get. So he asked everyone to come together so that he could count them and make them pay more money.”
* You can make it funny if you want… but be sure that you have children who won’t interpret laughter as being “laughed at.” And make sure you include a silent time, or sacred moment where the congregation is reminded of how holy children are… not only how cute they are!

5) Include a Bell That Won’t Ring (You will need a beautiful sounding bell with it’s clapper taped inside so it can’t ring.)

* Before you begin lessons and carols explain to the children that you have a very special bell. It is the *Bell of Christmas Joy!*
* Explain to the children that this bell rings out the joy of the story of Jesus birth and God’s love!!
* Tell them that throughout the service, you will be ringing your special *Bell of Christmas Joy!*
* Then, try to ring it making a BIG deal out of the fact that it won’t ring and then act shocked!!!
* Do this as many times as you can until the scripture of the baby being born is read… then say: “Well I am going to try this one more time.” And ring it and shout: The Bell of Christmas Joy rang… and do you know why? Because Jesus is born!
* Then ring it as much as you want for the rest of the service.
* As the children leave, give them a little bell that says: I am your very own Christmas Bell of Joy. Place me under your pillow tonight and first thing, on Christmas morning, ring me! I will remind you that Jesus is born!

PLEASE NOTE: This would also be a very fun Advent ritual for Sunday School or Children’s Time. Try to ring it while you wait during the four weeks of Advent and ring it the start of your Christmas Eve Service. (I have made a youtube about this idea @ <https://youtu.be/CKgx6nDYPps>).