



# How to ...

## Create a great all-age worship service

**All-age Worship is a lot like Marmite – some like it, some don't! However, this service should be an integral part of the worshipping life of the church as it is often the rare occasion when everyone comes together for worship and fellowship. Often this factor is forgotten or substituted to 'accommodate' children but the most powerful and blessed all-age services are those that not only respect that all generations are present but also reflect that everyone is an equal heir to the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:14).**

For this reason, it is really important to state that there are no short-cuts when planning an all-age service. The best all-age worship services take a lot of planning so apologies if you are hoping that this 'how to' guide will provide you with a quick fix solution. However, this guide does provide you with some advice and tips that will help create relevant, engaging (fun) and worshipful times together as your congregation gathers as the body of Christ.

### What is all-age worship?

Have you ever asked yourself the question 'what is all-age worship?' Have a look through the following statements, think about your experiences of all-age worship and then select the options that you think best describes your all-age worship:

1. The usual service with a children's talk
2. An hour of the lowest level of mental and spiritual input
3. All ages and levels of understanding worship together, each person giving and receiving at his own level
4. A time to worship God with our whole selves through colour, light, movement and symbols as much as listening and reading
5. An attempt to offer worship and teaching which is accessible to enquirers and the fringe while still keeping the spiritual atmosphere and feeding and challenging the regular and informed worshippers
6. Singing modern songs with the guitar instead of using the hymn books and organ
7. The children doing the 'jobs' normally done by adults
8. Informal – collect a few ideas on Saturday night and let it just happen

Thankfully there are no perfect answers, but hopefully your selections will hopefully have drawn towards 3, 4 and 5 rather than 1, 2 and 8. Look carefully at numbers 6 and 7. What about 4 and 5 - is this a description of your current all-age worship?

The reason for asking you these questions is because too many churches stumble at the first hurdle when planning their all-age service (and often this is why people with young families do not attend!). Applying some clear objectives of what you are aiming to create will make planning an all-age service so much easier. A useful tip is writing a vision statement for your all-age worship because the service is a) given a distinctive identity and character b) provides the platform for creativity to flow and c) the statement also clarifies to wider church family (and community) the intention and focus of your all-age worship. For example:

***All-age worship is a blessed place that brings all generations together to laugh, listen, learn and grow in our love for one another and God.***

## Where do I begin planning?

Just as many Pixar films brilliantly engage adults, teenagers and children, all-age services can also make connections at multiple layers. Yes, Pixar films do take years of planning from the initial idea to the premiere but their planning process does produce results every time!

This means that planning your service the night before is not an effective approach to planning (but you already knew this). Remember that the key to all-age worship is 'preparation' and below are some of the key elements that will assist you in your planning:

- Be clear about your aims
- Keep it simple. Most all-age services contain too much material
- Don't put all your ideas or talents into one service. There is always next time
- Aim to reach all levels of spirituality and understanding
- Always go for good quality
- Use all your senses! Too much worship consists of listening and reading so be creative using visual aids, lighting, movement, scent, touch.
- Use the people's skills and talents, not just the priest or worship leader's.
- Be aware that this is probably the most difficult service that you will ever lead

## What about the format?

All-age Worship usually adopts three formats, *Eucharistic Worship*, *a Service of the Word* or a *DIY* form of service. In some parishes, every service is all-age worship and, indeed, there should always be elements of this as any congregation will contain people of different stages of faith as well as physical age. The most common pattern is for there to be special all-age service once a month, but some parishes reserve it for special occasions like Mothering Sunday, Parade Service, Remembrance Sunday or major Festivals.

### If you follow the lectionary based approach...

- What are these readings saying to us?
- How can we present them in appropriate ways for the congregation with its different levels of understanding?
- Are any variations necessary?

**Advantages:** Uses the liturgical year, an often neglected gift that reflects every experience and mood; continuity with other weeks' teaching, preparation etc. and covers a wide range of Scripture. **But:** Be prepared to cut/adapt readings that are inappropriate or too long; keep an index of resources used over the years to help to produce good illustrative, dramatic or musical material for the right occasion.

### If you prefer a thematic approach ask similar questions but in different order...

- What do we intend to focus on today?
- How can we present it in an appropriate way for the congregation with its different levels of understanding?
- Which Scripture readings, prayers and music will help to illustrate the theme?

**Advantages:** Good chance to use a wide range of material; especially helpful when most of the congregation are children, e.g. in a school or on holiday; may be the best way forward when focusing on a local or national incident.

**Warning:** There is a danger of using a few favourite Bible stories and themes (and repeating them!) and therefore not challenging people to think deeply or explore new ideas.

## Other aspects of the service worth considering:

- **Prayers:** Consider using a mixed age group to lead them or try some creative prayers that are engaging, visual and powerful. Click [here](#) for ideas
- **Learning:** Can be a talk using visual aids, drama based on a reading or a reflection on it, a Q&A session, dialogue, or just a simple commentary on the readings. Here are some simple questions to ask to help you plan the teaching slot:
  - What is the one thing you want people to take away?
  - What is the one issue you want to challenge people about?
  - What is the one thing you want people to apply in their lives?
- **Music:** Use a mixture of styles. See that each hymn has a purpose and links with the theme. Have a percussion box that young children (and adults too) can play during certain hymns. Find out what songs the local school use and the children can teach the congregation a song. If you have a worship band invite children to play in the group (or start one up!).
- **Movement/drama:** Posture and movement say more than words. Plays and mimes are useful tools as well.
- **Visual aids:** Use your building: its lighting, stained glass and furnishings as well as props. Please do not do death by PowerPoint!
- **Atmosphere:** Easily forgotten but the most important. Made with all the above plus, use of silence, smell, colour, and timing. Also worth playing children's/family friendly worship music on a CD before or after the service (you might get asked by a parent what it is so that they can buy it for car journeys).
- **Refreshments:** Why not do refreshments (and make what you provide is good quality) before the service starts rather than at the end? Families are often rushed getting to church in the mornings and this allows some breathing space, time to relax (and avoids the walk of shame when they arrive late!).
- **Review and evaluate:** after each service/year ask yourself/your team the following (you can also refer back to your vision statement):
  - Who and what did you use? How and when did you use them?
  - Were there any points that needed explanation or commentary?
  - Was the result an act of worship or a collection of happenings?
  - Was there quality and depth or did we swing towards superficiality and entertainment?
  - Did everyone have an opportunity to worship and encounter the living God?

Finally, some words from Reinhold Niebuhr which are appropriate for all-age worship because sometimes planning the service can be a contentious issue, especially when people express their own opinions and expectations. I hope this prayer encourages you to create fun, friendly, interactive, loving environments, encouraging all to receive at their level:

*O God, grant us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what can be changed and the wisdom to know the difference*

**Further advice, training, resources (including access to all-age prayers, liturgies etc.) and support is available from Dan Jones the Diocesan Youth and Children's Adviser:**

**Please contact Dan on 0117 906 0100 | [daniel.jones@bristoldiocese.org](mailto:daniel.jones@bristoldiocese.org)**

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