

## Children in Worship: Soaking in It and Soaking It in

*Learning by osmosis: unconscious learning; learning by immersion or exposure*

The other day, mid-week, I heard my seven-year-old humming and singing a hymn from church. I recognized it as “Borning Cry,” the special hymn that our congregation sings once every couple of months as part of a baptism. Before this, the children have blessed the baptism water that was used for this holy sacrament and then walk (or run) back to their spots on the pews next to Mom and Dad. I joined in with her on the last line and was impressed she knew the words better than I. Curious to know if she was aware of the origin of this earworm, I asked where she had picked it up. She responded, “In church, I think.”

Now, I admit I work for the church, and I know my kids hang around our building plenty, but to dispel any misconceptions, we do not sit around the table singing from the Methodist hymnal and we rarely (hardly ever) have family devotional time. We are just as busy and harried as the next family. We don’t even kneel by the bed for night time prayers; it’s a good day when we remember to bless our dinner. Too much honesty? Here’s more. Not only do we have normal weekdays, but on Sunday mornings, it feels like my children do more squirming, talking, and bathroom visiting than all the other children combined. It is a strong temptation to leave my four-year-old in childcare every Sunday. We have begun, however, to bring him along more often, and on a Wednesday in the kitchen with my daughter, God let me see a glimpse into the reason why. I realized in this musical moment how amazing a child’s capacity to learn and intuit is; that even when it looks like no attention is being paid, a child may be absorbing the world around herself with acute clarity.

That is one reason First United Methodist, along with many other congregations, promotes intergenerational, corporate worship. *All* are welcome, including all *ages*. Elaine Ward, in her book *Children and Worship*, suggests we “bring children to worship gradually and consistently as something [the] family does together.” I personally know this task can be daunting. I know it sometimes feels like attending to my young child’s needs robs me of experiencing a meaningful time of worship and restoration. I have a stack of books with ideas and techniques to transform the battle into the blessed. It is hard work, but it is my and my husband’s job as parents who care about our child’s faith formation. I am reminded of the importance of our roles as mentors and guides in Robbie Castleman’s account of her teen years in *Parenting from the Pew*. She describes herself as “a Sunday-morning dropout” and says a major reason for this was because she “had never been trained to worship. I had

only been told how to be quiet in church. During my childhood, my dear parents did not know the difference.”

We begin reading to our babies before they know how to read. We take time to teach our children the mechanics of riding a bike, spelling their vocabulary words and using table manners. Why do we think they will just figure out worship without some help? And then I ask, can we teach what we ourselves don't know?

This is a first in a series of articles to help all of us be better equipped for teaching our young disciples the joy and discipline of authentic worship. I look forward to sharing with you the wisdom of wonderful authors, ministers and parents.

Inspired by my daughter's subconsciously learned hymn, achieved only because she was in the room when it was sung, my first goal for you is to work toward consistent attendance in worship – yours and your child's. I know with summer travels, this can be a challenge. I am encouraging your family to make it a priority as you plan and move through your summer as you are able.

Happy worshipping!

**Lara Greene**

Dir. of Children's Ministries