

Intergenerational • All Ages Together • All together now

Children in Quaker Worship

Melinda Wenner Bradley

It's not about grafting children onto our worship and giving them stuff to keep busy, but inviting them **into** the experience of worship fully and making room for what might help them to enter and be in that contemplative space.



What do we mean when we say, "intergenerational worship?"

Intergenerational ministry is characterized by an emphasis on **community** and the building of deep, genuine **relationships** across ages/generations of people who are sharing, learning, growing together. It's about people of all ages, not just "including children." It is not just something that happens — it requires *intentionality*. Intergenerationality is marked by:

- **mutuality**: we all participate and benefit
- **reciprocity**: we all give and receive
- **equality**: we are all valued

Recipe for: intergenerational worship

ingredients

- Friends of all ages!
- Space to sit comfortably, wiggle, stand, lie down, stretch, etc.
- Quiet materials: crayons, paper, trays to work on, coloring mandalas, basket of Friendly books, finger labyrinths
- Patience, Love, Open Hearts
- God will provide the rest!

Directions

- Gather with welcome, greeting each Friend.
- *Recommended: begin with song, prayer, story, or build an image of community together with art materials, blocks, or natural objects.*
- Make space for each person to center in their way.
- Practice listening with your whole self.
- When something gets noisy, or bumps you from the silence, notice it, and release it. Center again.
- Keep listening with your whole self.
- At the rise of meeting, share fellowship with all!

From the kitchen of Melinda Wenner Bradley ©2020

Preparing the whole community is vital.

Prepare children: Create a time in the children's religious education program to talk about their experience of being in worship, and what's happening there. A collection of practical ideas can be found on the PYM website [here](#). One of my favorites is the [Worship Bowl](#) lesson that I created, that explores the "container" of waiting worship, and what we bring to it.

Other wonderful resources for practicing and exploring Quaker worship with children:

- [Finding the Light in You: Bright, Silent Worship with Young Friends](#) — a guided imagery approach to learning the practice of waiting worship
- [First Day Stories with Lessons for Young Friends](#) (for meeting or home)
- [We're Going to Meeting](#) (focused on a Friends school experience of meeting for worship)
- [Faith & Play Stories](#): Listening for God, Prayer and Friends Meeting for Worship

Prepare families: Support families with children by offering them language to prepare their children at home to be in worship at meeting, so the invitation is clear that this is for them and they have choices for how to be in that time, along with some expectations based on what everyone is doing in waiting worship. Books like [We're Going to Meeting for Worship](#) (and [this great exploration of that book](#) from FGC's Spiritual Deepening Library) or ["Quaker Meeting and Me"](#) from the Quaker Religious Education Collaborative can be shared with families.

I often hear, "But parents need the hour of worship without their children's presence" — that it is a time of respite and refreshment for them that can be precious in the intensity of parenthood. I don't disagree, as the parent of three children, but I think there is room for both to be true, and attended to, in the life of the meeting: care for people who are parenting, and a time for children to experience worship with their families and the body. Craig Barnett speaks my mind in his piece, ["Nurturing the Seed"](#) —

"A Quaker Meeting is not a meditation group; it is a community, where people share their lives and minister to each other. The aim of Quaker worship is not an hour of undisturbed silence. It is a shared openness to the Spirit that is present among us to challenge, to guide and to heal. All of us, of any age, can discover this source of life and make it visible to others."

What if, as a meeting, we did not ask people who are parenting to rely on the hour of worship for respite and refreshment? What if pastoral care by the meeting included more support for parents? What could that look like, and how could it nurture intergenerational relationships? Another consideration since COVID rocked all our worlds is that parents and children may be seeking a spiritual home, but are not always ready to separate from one another in new places. When I'm asked how to be "ready" for new families, seekers crossing our thresholds with children by the hand, my response is that you already have what you need — worship. How do you prepare that space to welcome everyone?

Prepare the Meeting: The decision to try intergenerational worship is discernment for the whole meeting, and should come to meeting for business. The movement of the spirit is often from a children's religious education committee, and I'd like to suggest that this is a place for collaboration between CRE and the worship and ministry committee. It is about the worship of the whole community, not planning a "family worship," and both committees might provide care for the planning and experience of this worship. A query to consider as a meeting: Why are Friends moved to have all ages worship? Is it to support parents coming to worship? Is it for children to learn the practice of waiting worship? Is it to be all together across generations? I am a firm believer that knowing "why" helps to shape your "how" — How will this holy experiment look for your meeting?

Practicalities and Practices:

I think what we make available in all ages worship should be very open materials. Our hope is that whatever a child "works" with leads them into listening inwardly. This is different from the "busy box" idea, and I've wrestled some with what to call these things we're making available in worship -- Are they "quiet activities"? "things to keep your hands busy while we listen together"? After some reading, I've started calling them *spiritual practices*. Things like "praying in color" and labyrinths are practices adults engage in that take into account that some people enter more visually and kinesthetically into contemplative spaces. I am trying to commit to calling these materials for everyone *spiritual practices* to raise the level of the conversation, even though I do feel a little silly talking about pipe cleaners like this sometimes!

Some suggestions from what's available during all ages worship at my meeting and when I take this idea on the road visiting meetings --

- Coloring pages (coloring mandalas are easily copied) and coloring posters from [Illustrated Ministry](#). The posters are something multiple people can gather around, and may take time to complete so they become something consistent to make available time after time. A work in progress for the community.
- Note: Crayons -- not markers -- are quieter during waiting worship (I've made that mistake and it was awful how noisy marker caps turn out to be!) and it's important that they are in baskets or other softer, not-noisy containers (made that mistake, too, with a plastic jar of colored pencils!)
- [Finger labyrinths](#) -- I've found less expensive wooden ones on Etsy, but you can also photocopy designs on heavy cardstock, or make them by gluing the design in yarn on cardstock or cardboard.
- Settling jar (children might make them; I have a big one in a glass water bottle)
- Pipe cleaners -- my favorite. soooo quiet and open to imagination
- Trays for coloring on, and also for play-dough
- For older youth, I have a separate box at our meeting that includes their journals with pens, and some more complex coloring pages/mandalas with coloring pencils.
- I love picture books, but have mixed feelings about them in worship. I usually put out a basket of ones that are from our children's RE collection. Adults may have the experience of reading something and setting it aside during worship, so I'm not sure it makes sense not to have the same for children -- and I've often seen adults look at one of the picture books, too. Or a child looks through a book and then puts it down to sit quietly in the silence.

Worship spaces are prepared spaces (even ones grounded in simplicity), and I suggest these materials need to be ready and available in the room before worship begins. The intentionality of that preparation is a message of welcome and inclusion. They are part of what is there for everyone in the silence of waiting worship, and not just as "children's things." My mantra with all ages worship is that "everything is available for everyone." The silence, sharing vocal ministry, the pipe cleaners, sitting on the floor on the quilt. It's not about grafting children onto our worship and giving them stuff to keep busy, but inviting them *into* it fully and making room for what might help them to enter and be in that contemplative space.

Have you ever worshipped in a place where the primary language spoken was not yours? You might not feel you fully belonged, and even if there was generous welcome, it might be hard to fully engage in the worship. Story and play are the native languages of childhood. How does it feel for children if neither is present (spoken) in worship? My hope is that the spiritual practices we make available during intergenerational worship have the qualities of play¹ and that together with sharing stories these grounding practices tell children: this is a place for you, too. When I tell a Godly Play or Faith & Play story at the beginning of worship, sometimes the story materials I've used become another possible spiritual practice children can work with during worship.

Someone once described to me that they observed a "restless manipulation" of the available materials, and I think can lead to adults thinking that children are not listening in the silence of waiting worship. Yes, for some children there will be a lot of picking up and putting down. We had all ages worship during a Quarterly Meeting, and I expect that most of the ten or so children sitting on the floor with me and other adults had never stayed in worship for the full hour. There was a lot of moving from one thing to another — looking at a picture book, putting it down to color, setting that aside to get some pipe cleaners.

But this reminded me of the many places my adult mind goes as I try to settle into waiting worship. Practicing listening takes time and, well, practice. Spiritual development is so much more than the acquisition of knowledge; it is grounded in relationships and it is the development of habits and patterns by being in proximity to that which we desire to grow into.² In this way, intergenerational meeting for worship is more than a place of learning. It's a place of being, a place of belonging, a place of peace and love, of being open to the Spirit, a place for all ages and all developmental stages and abilities to find communion and grace together in being members of one body.

¹ That it is pleasurable, voluntary, done for itself, absorbing, connected with creativity, a way to learn languages, social roles, and problem solving.

² Christina Embree, "Is Church "Developmentally Appropriate" for Kids?," July 30, 2019. <https://refocusministry.org/is-church-developmentally-appropriate-for-kids/>

I have faith that children are bringing their whole selves to worship, and while that can be messy (movement, sound) it also means they are present to what's happening around them even if it doesn't look like it to us. This probably comes from my experiences with Godly Play/Faith & Play, and trusting that even when a child doesn't wonder out loud in the circle after a story, the story is moving in them in some way. After a time that Quarterly Meeting morning, there was a sense of settling in and it became more still and quiet on the quilt on the floor, even with the coloring and page turning and reaching for a finger labyrinth. We had heard the Godly Play parable of the mustard seed at the start of worship, and several people shared vocal ministry related to the story. At one point I watched a young child who had been looking at a book put it down and listen intently to the adult sharing a message. I have no idea what the child heard in that ministry, and I don't need to know — they took in what spoke to them in that moment, where they were.

Looking around the children in worship, I marveled that they were there, experiencing our worship together and being part of it. It takes so much practice to settle into the silence of waiting worship, to learn how to listen inwardly, and we have to begin somewhere. I think this invitation to intergenerational worship with story and spiritual practices is a first step in the spirit of mutuality, reciprocity, and equality. All together now.

Example: Greeter's Message/Announcement for Getting Ready

Welcome! This morning is an experience of semi-programmed intergenerational worship for all ages, all together.

After worship begins, we'll hear a Faith & Play story and then waiting worship will continue. Friends of all ages are welcome to sit on the floor for the story and worship.

There will be quiet, creative materials that are spiritual practices to encourage inward listening and are available for all ages. Intergenerational means "everything is available for everyone" — sharing vocal ministry, using materials provided, making a choice about where to sit (or lie down), resting in the silence.

An adult will be available to accompany children to another space if they become uncomfortable in the worship space. At the rise of worship there will be a time to discuss Friends' experience of the time together in worship this morning, and announcements.



From a Quarterly Meeting program flyer (PhYM)

Intergenerational Worship in the Beloved Community

Providing an Environment to Nurture All

Come, bring your children! Bring their favorite toy, blanket/quilt, and pillow! Westtown has been using Intergenerational Worship with Faith & Play for almost a year and our parents and children love it! Our whole community loves it! Research has proven children grow in their knowledge and understanding of Quakerism by participating regularly in Meeting for Worship. They are much more likely to become active members as adults. During this Quarterly Meeting you will learn about Intergenerational Worship by experiencing it and then discussing it afterwards. This program is for all ages of Friends because intergenerational means "everything is for everyone." Children and families need accompaniment of all generations together. Come and experience this unique way that Westtown has grown their Meeting community and learn how to bring it to your Meeting.

[Making Spaces for Children In Worship](#)

(Melinda Wenner Bradley,
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting website
story, May 30, 2024)

"A rising interest in intergenerational worship in the yearly meeting has also led to meetings creating spaces for children in the places where they worship. This is more than putting a "children's area" in the places where we worship — It is a visible message to any newcomer, including families with children: "Children are welcome here."



West Chester Meeting



Old Haverford Meeting



Cropwell Meeting



Abington Meeting

More from the "Making Spaces" article:

"Several years ago, during an intergenerational meeting for worship, a child sitting near me on the floor leaned over and whispered, "How much longer is this?" I smiled, and made a conscious decision to whisper back, "I'm so glad you're here today." They regarded me for a moment with a look that said, "You didn't answer the question, which should have been a number of minutes," then smiled back at me and settled themselves for the rest of the time. (It was about eleven minutes.) My words were chosen to let them know that their presence mattered for all of us, hoping to encourage them to continue to be present in the way they wanted to be in that time left together. Adults have the privilege and responsibility to explain, practice, and share our faith alongside children in worship, while being open to the possibility that children's spirituality is different from their own."

These two articles from the "Building Faith" website offer useful ideas that can be adapted for Quaker worship:

- [Children's Behavior in Worship: Does Your Congregation Have Reasonable Expectations?](#)
- [Helping Children Prepare for Worship: Objects, Practices & Support](#)