

Intergenerational Worship: Leader's Guide



Ministry Leadership Center Press
Intergenerational Worship: World Communion Sunday Leader's
Guide

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Overview of Intergenerational Worship

What to do with this guide:

This guide is for the leaders who will be designing and implementing an intergenerational service for World Communion Sunday. It will walk you through everything: the space, the roles, the materials, choosing the intergenerational elements that make sense in your context, the service rhythm, and how to communicate the value of intergenerational worship with your congregation.

What is Intergenerational Worship?

At the Ministry Leadership Center, we believe that worship should reflect the fullness of the kin-dom of God and cultivate belonging in the midst of diverse identities and life experiences. Through our intergenerational worship offerings, it is our goal to design resources that enable ministry leaders to articulate and participate in a theological vision for worship that cultivates belonging across generations, receives the gifts of children and young people as integral voices in the worship space, and forms faith communally rather than in generational silos.

The worship service, at its best, is a holistic and embodied method of faith formation. Through its liturgical elements, we see the core values of Christianity made visible. We welcome all people regardless of status, pass peace as an act of reconciliation, confess our collective sin aloud, receive grace we did not earn, proclaim a story that reshapes our identity, and are sent into the world to live what we have practiced together as a community of faith—only to return and practice again, trusting that these practices are forming us into people who more fully reflect the love of Christ in the world. However, the church has often been a poor communicator and includer when it comes to naming what the elements of worship are actually teaching us about who God is, who we are, and how we are meant to live. Too often, we assume that meaning is self-evident, leaving worshipers to participate in powerful, formative practices without ever being invited into their deeper interpretations and purposes. As a result, people may learn the rote motions of worship without understanding the deep theological meaning underpinning each moment of worship.

Theological Grounding

The Foundations of Intergenerational Worship

There are seven theological convictions that ground MLC's intergenerational worship resources. These theological commitments are at the core of all of our intergenerational offerings, ensuring that worship engages the whole person and invites mutual participation rather than passive consumption.

The Expansive Imago Dei

Every person bears the image of God and therefore holds inherent dignity. This dignity extends across the full life cycle, across ability, and across all the intersecting identities present within a congregation. Intergenerational ministry begins with the conviction that every voice matters and every body belongs.

Resurrection Hope

Christian hope is not abstract optimism but trust informed by the resurrection of Christ. It acknowledges death, loss, and decline while refusing to end there. Resurrection hope infuses every space of the church, calling us into active participation in God's renewing work even when the future feels uncertain.

Vulnerability

Growth requires vulnerability—with one another and with God. Faithful communities make room for uncertainty, doubt, and incomplete answers, trusting that formation happens not through certainty but through honest participation in the incarnate and resurrected Christ at work in the world.

Responsibility

Those who hold power and privilege in the church—most often adults—carry a responsibility to make that power accessible to others. This includes creating conditions where children, youth, and marginalized voices can fully participate, lead, and be received as essential members of the body.

The Foundations of Intergenerational Worship (cont.)

Agency

All people possess agency as part of the priesthood of all believers. Spiritual formation is not something done to people but something undertaken together. Every person has a role, a gift, and a contribution that shapes the life and witness of the community.

Embodiment

Faith is lived through the whole person. It does not reside only in intellect or emotion but unfolds through bodies, relationships, practices, and shared experience. Our pedagogy must therefore engage the fullness of human life, attending to how belief is formed through doing, sensing, and participating.

Language

We seek to offer language, practices, and communal life that help people interpret their encounters with God over time. Formation happens as meaning is named and shared—responding to the insight that “I had the experience, but I missed the meaning.” Language gives experience theological depth without prescribing the conclusion.

What's in the guide?

In preparation for the service, you will receive two documents:

The Supply List/Overview Guide

This document contains an overview of the service and a full supply list for the week. It contains:

- The Seasonal and Weekly Synopsis
- The Theological Lens for the week
- Preparing for Leading—a brief reflection for leaders before the service
- Leadership Roles for the week
- The Supply List for the week
- Preparing the Worship Environment—including instructions for the Focus Table
- Any printed supplements for the week.

The Liturgical Guide

This is the primary planning document for your worship leaders (Senior/ Preaching Pastor, Musicians, liturgists). It contains:

- The Seasonal and Weekly Synopsis
- Guiding Texts—the week's scriptures, printed in full
- An Intergenerational Proclamation Method for the week
- Liturgical Elements: Call to Worship, Prayer of Confession/Assurance, Call to Offering, Communion Guidance, Benediction
 - Note: Some seasons include a seasonal element such as an Advent candle reading
- Children of God Moment—with stage direction and Notice and Tend coaching
- Music Suggestions

Setting the Stage for Intergenerational Worship

How do you build an intergenerational worship service?

Before you can implement an intergenerational worship service, some preparatory tasks will help pave the way for success.

Educating the Congregation

This method of worship is likely new or unfamiliar to many of your congregants. Many regular churchgoers are used to the predictable flow of worship, and changing that without educating them about why the change is being made, even for special Sundays or seasons, is a missed opportunity. Intergenerational worship makes spaces for all voices, ages, and experiences to be wrapped up in the movement of the Spirit through worship.

Before the season or service, take a moment to educate your congregation on the benefits of intergenerational worship. A brief word from the pulpit, a note in the bulletin, or a short conversation with key ministry leaders can go a long way in preparing hearts and minds for what's ahead. When people understand the why behind the change, they're far more likely to embrace it as an invitation to experience the fullness of the body of Christ gathered together rather than a disruption.

Choose Your Own Adventure

Since intergenerational worship is likely new to many of your congregants, we suggest easing them into it. The Liturgical Guide contains intergenerational suggestions for nearly every moment of the worship service. Do not do all of these elements in one service, as it will likely be overwhelming to most. Instead, read over the material and pick the elements that you think will best engage your congregation and make meaningful intergenerational engagement.

Think of the intergenerational liturgical offerings like a menu, and choose what will work best for your service. As your congregation grows more comfortable, you can gradually introduce additional elements over the following weeks or seasons. By slowly introducing your congregation to what intergenerational worship is all about, you are allowing people time to adjust, ask questions, and experience the value of intergenerational worship firsthand, rather than feeling as though the entire service has been unexpectedly overhauled. Allow your congregation to grow into intergenerational practice; like most growth in the life of a church, it happens step by step rather than all at once.

Preparing The Service

Before you can implement an intergenerational worship service, you need to know what the key elements are and how they work together.

The Focus Table

The Focus Table is a low, wide table set up in your worship space, accessible to children of all ages, with enough room for several children to work at it side by side. It is not a craft table, and it is not a Sunday school station. It is a provocation—a carefully curated environment designed to invite children into the week's theme through touch, exploration, and imagination.

Each week, the Focus Table holds materials related to that week's scripture and theological theme. The materials are open-ended: children are not told what to do with them. They are invited to explore.

The Focus Table should be visible to the full congregation. Adults need to be able to see what children are doing because this visibility is part of how the congregation learns to receive the children's work as genuine theological participation. Children do not leave the sanctuary.

The Focus Table belongs at the front of the sanctuary, or wherever the congregation's natural sightline is. It should not be tucked in a corner or set up in an adjacent hallway. The whole congregation should be able to see it.

Generational Involvement

The goal of this worship experience is not to privilege one generation's voice over the other's—rather, the goal is for each generation to be heard and for each generation to interact with someone of another generation. This is not about children performing for adults, or adults simply tolerating a "kid-friendly" moment before returning to "real" worship. Real worship happens when every member of the Body of Christ is given the opportunity to be attuned to God's presence, discovered in communion with one another. Intergenerational worship is about creating a space where a child's voice carries the same weight as an adult's, where questions and doubts from children, teenagers, young adults, adults, and seniors are all welcomed as part of the same act of worship. When generations interact rather than simply exist in the same space, the church begins to reflect the expansive nature of the Image of God.



A NOTE ON GENERATIONAL AWARENESS

You may be a part of a worshiping body with missing generations. Maybe your congregation skews older, or you have very few children, or young adults are hard to find in your pews on a Sunday morning. Don't let this discourage you or stop you from engaging with intergenerational worship. This practice isn't dependent on having every generation evenly represented in the room; even with just two generations present, you can make space for meaningful intergenerational engagement. Preparing your congregation to worship across generational lines now can itself become a faithful act of hope and invitation. By modeling the kind of community and engagement your congregation longs to see, you are co-creating a space that radically welcomes missing generations when they do come.

The Rhythm of the Service

Our model of intergenerational worship is designed to fit within your existing worship order. However, you do need to make room for a few specific elements.

Children of God Moment

Children of God Moment takes place in the service after the scripture reading. It is a brief, structured moment in which the leader of the moment engages with children at or near the Focus Table and shares what they are noticing with the congregation.

The Liturgical Guide contains stage direction for this moment organized around five movements:

- **Describe:** Narrate what you see on the Focus Table without interpretation. “I notice there is food in the center of the table, and there are many brown items.”
- **Notice:** Name specific ways children are engaging with the materials. “I notice there are lots of things to touch that are smooth.”
- **Wonder:** Open a question without directing the answer. “I wonder what you smell on the table today. What does that make you think of?”
- **Engage:** Invite a child or the congregation into a brief exchange. Reflect their answers back so the congregation can hear them too.
- **Thank:** Close by affirming the children’s effort, focus, and presence—not their product. Do not evaluate or rank what they made.



TIPS FOR THE CHILDREN OF GOD MOMENT

- The Children of God moment provides an important opportunity for the congregation to witness the theological work of the children in their community. Your facilitator will need a microphone to repeat the children’s words verbatim to the congregation.

The Liturgical Elements

Each week's Liturgical Guide contains a full set of liturgical texts: Call to Worship, Prayers of Pardon/Assurance, Call to Offering, Communion Guidance, a Benediction, and seasonal elements, depending on the season. These are written to be intergenerational, theologically grounded, and participatory. These elements are also adaptable to the layout and traditions of your community. If you do not do communion on a weekly basis, then skip that section. If you have a particular Prayers of the People liturgy or format that is especially meaningful for your community, feel free to stick with that. This is meant to accompany your community's unique identity, not replace it. Remember, choose wisely what elements you select so as not to overwhelm your congregation.

The Intergenerational Proclamation

What Is Intergenerational Proclamation?

We often stymie the breadth of proclamation by limiting it to the sermon alone. What does it look like to offer a moment for proclamation of the Word that invites intergenerational engagement? In the section of the Liturgical guide, you will find instructions to lead a truly intergenerational moment of proclamation.

Intergenerational proclamation is the practice of delivering God's Word in a way that meets every generation where they are without diluting its theological depth. We are not suggesting a simplified sermon; rather, it is a moment of proclamation crafted with enough depth, imagination, and accessibility that a seven-year-old and a seventy-year-old can both walk away having genuinely encountered the text.

As you adapt and prepare, assume all ages are present and listening. Let that assumption shape everything about the moment of proclamation.

Suggested Models of Intergenerational Proclamation:

In each Liturgical Guide, you will find a suggested method for intergenerational proclamation. If that suggestion does not fit your context, we would like to suggest two alternatives for the moment of proclamation that might feel more comfortable to your congregation.

Intergenerational Sermon Development

Before you begin to write your sermon, gather a small, intentionally intergenerational group to read and explore the Isaiah and Colossians texts with you. This approach treats the community itself as a theological resource, shaping the themes that will guide your sermon preparation and delivery. As a child's question or an elder's memory shapes the direction of your interpretation, the priesthood of believers is made real in the act of sermon preparation.

Instructions:

Invite members of your congregation into an act of shared reflection in which people of different ages and stages bring their own questions and lived experience to the same text. Together, the community is invited to discern what the Spirit might be saying to your community this week.

Plan to gather your group the week before the service (or earlier, if preferred). Aim for 60-75 minutes of shared time together. When creating the guest list, consider inviting people who represent different age groups and life experiences: at least two children (with a parent or trusted adult present), a teenager or young adult, a midlife adult, and an elder. Aim for six to nine participants in total. Let them know that their job will be to simply read and wonder alongside you.

Intergenerational Sermon Development (cont.)

Begin with the texts. Read them aloud—slowly, and more than once. Consider asking different people, including children, to read if they are willing. Let the words settle before you begin.

Invite open-ended wondering. Ask questions that have no single right answer. Some things to consider:

- What word or image from the text stays with you?
- What surprises you here, or what do you find hard to understand?
- Does this remind you of anything in your own life?
- What do you think God might be saying to us through this passage today?

Follow the group's lead. Resist the urge to correct, redirect, or guide toward your own conclusions. Some of the most generative moments will come from unexpected directions—a child who asks what a plowshare is and what it has to do with a sword; or an elder who remembers what it felt like to live through a season of conflict and reconciliation. Let these voices shape the interpretive direction.

Take notes. Keep a notepad or device nearby and jot down phrases, images, questions, or moments of resonance as they arise. These notes become the living material from which you write your sermon.

Close with prayer. Thank the group for their wisdom, and pray together over the service to come.

As you write: Let the group's questions and insights anchor the sermon's themes and illustrations. If a child wondered aloud why nations keep fighting when they know it's wrong, let that wondering appear in your sermon. If an elder connected the image of the shared table to a memory of reconciliation across a painful divide, weave that thread in. The sermon you preach will carry the fingerprints of the whole community.

Lectio/Audio/Visio Divina

Sacred reading, sacred listening, sacred seeing

The word *divina* is Latin for "divine" or "sacred" and describes a family of contemplative practices that invite participants to encounter God through slow, repeated engagement with a piece of media. Lectio divina, or divine reading, uses a written text; audio divina, or divine listening, uses a piece of music or a sound recording; and visio divina, or divine seeing, uses an image. Each moves through the same rhythm: a first encounter, a second, deeper encounter, and a response—inviting participants to notice what catches their attention and to listen for what God might be saying through what they experience.

These practices are particularly well suited for intergenerational worship because none of them require literacy, prior biblical knowledge, or verbal sophistication. Children and elders alike are equally able to sit with the same text, sound, or image and encounter it, each from their own faith and experience. Whatever medium you choose becomes a threshold for shared reflection that is accessible to everyone in the room.

Choosing your Media

Select a passage, image, or piece of audio that reveals something meaningful about the week's scripture or theme. Consider the following as you choose:

- How does it connect to the text? The piece doesn't need to illustrate the passage literally; instead, it might capture a mood, a tension, a question, or an emotion present in the text.
- Is it simple enough to sit with? Avoid media that is overly complex, busy, or requires significant explanation to one or all generations.
- Is it accessible to all ages? Choose something a child can engage with honestly, and an adult won't outgrow.
- Does it leave room for multiple responses? The richest choices are open enough that different people—and different generations—can notice different things. Avoid media with only one "correct" takeaway.

Lectio/Audio/Visio Divina (Cont.)

- Is it the right length or size for your time frame? A short passage (a few verses, not a full chapter), a brief musical excerpt (2-4 minutes), or a single image all work better than something sprawling. Participants need to be able to return to it three times within a short window.

For lectio divina: choose a short passage of scripture, poetry, or prose that either is the text for the week or reveals something about the text for the week.

For audio divina: choose a short piece of instrumental music, a song, or a brief speech that evokes the tone or theme of the text.

For visio divina: choose a piece of visual art, a photograph, or an illustration. This can be shared as bulletin art, a bulletin insert, or projected on screens.

This practice is flexible depending on your context. It can be used as preparation for a sermon, a response to a sermon, or as a stand-alone contemplative moment woven into the flow of the service. Allow approximately 10–12 minutes to complete the activity, with more time if you are planning to allow it to substitute for a sermon and want to allow for more audience sharing and engagement. Speak slowly and gently throughout, leaving genuine silence between each prompt.

Before you begin, invite the congregation to find a comfortable position. Invite them to take a few slow, deep breaths and release whatever they have carried into the room that day. If it feels right, dim the lights or offer a brief moment of quiet before you begin.

Lectio/Audio/Visio Divina (Cont.)

The Three Movements:

First Encounter—Noticing (1–2 minutes)

SAY: Take a moment to simply [look/read/listen]. Let your [eyes/ears/attention] move across the whole [image/passage/piece] without focusing on any one thing. What is the first thing that catches your attention? You don't need to explain why—just notice. Sit with what draws you.

Allow 60–90 seconds of silence.

[If this is replacing a sermon, encourage congregants to share the word, phrase, or detail they noticed in one word or phrase. You can call on hands or allow people to call out as they feel led.]

Second Encounter—Receiving (2–3 minutes)

SAY: Now let your attention rest gently on one part of the [image/passage/piece]—whatever is calling to you. Look, read, or listen to it more closely. What do you notice? What do you feel? Does anything here connect to your own life, or to something in the scripture we have heard today? Let it speak to you. You don't need to figure it out—just receive.

Allow 60–90 seconds of silence.

[If this is replacing a sermon, encourage congregants to turn to the folks around them, ideally 1–2 other people, and share what they are noticing on the second encounter. Give about 2 minutes to discuss.]

Lectio/Audio/Visio Divina (Cont.)

Third Encounter—Responding (2–3 minutes)

SAY: As you [look/read/listen] one final time, ask: What might God be saying to me—or to us—through this today? Is there an invitation here? A word of comfort, challenge, or hope? What is God calling me to as I go forth into the world? Rest in whatever arises, and offer it back to God in a simple prayer of your own.

Allow 60–90 seconds of silence.

Closing the Practice

SAY: When you are ready, gently bring your attention back to the room. Now, I would like to invite some of you to briefly share what stayed with you. What did you notice? How did the Spirit speak to you through this exercise?

Allow 2–5 minutes of communal sharing. You can call on raised hands or allow people to call out as they feel led.

Afterward, you have two options:

First, transition into a prepared sermon, or second, offer a brief, spoken reflection that connects what participants noticed to the primary theme or biblical text of the day. You can prepare this in advance while place-holding a section to highlight some of the primary themes based on responses, or offer an extemporaneous reflection (2–5 minutes, depending on your context and comfort level) that summarizes how the Spirit is moving in your own hearing of the congregation's meditations.

A Note for Leaders

Silence can feel awkward or unfamiliar in congregations not accustomed to contemplative practice. If you sense anxiety in the room, name it gently and warmly before you begin: "For some of us, silence may make us uncomfortable. That's okay. Let yourself simply be here. There is nothing to do, and nothing to get right. Just allow yourself to be, and let the Holy Spirit move among us."