

Big Church for Youth - Worshipping Together by Jen Wilkins of The Village Church,
Adapted

Psalm 34:3 O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.

I love this verse. When we were married, Jeff and I had it inscribed on the inside of our wedding bands. It summarized so well what we wanted our married life to be about: Glorifying God. Together. As our family grew, so did our desire for this verse to be true of our entire household: glorify the Lord *with me* - in our home, in our community, in our church.

The *with me* of church has required some intentionality, to say the least. We go to church in a weird place - so many people want to attend worship each week that just getting a seat is a major accomplishment... But every Sunday we all file in, from youngest to oldest, to glorify the Lord. Together.

Together hasn't always been easy. I recall long worship services with four elementary-aged children scribbling with crayons, begging for gum, and contorting themselves like miniature yogis in the pew. Just remembering it makes my eye twitch. But over time, with clear participation expectations, creative activities and the right combination of consequences and rewards our kids have grown to see "big church" not as a place they tolerate but as a place they belong. I'd compare it to learning to eat leafy greens or take naps: not fun at first, but valued in the long run.

Know what's fun? Children's church. Our church offers a ridiculously good children's worship time. I do not say that lightly - one of their most gifted worship leaders is the father of my babies. The leaders who serve there bring excellence to their ministry each week, and children learn deep spiritual truths in ways that are fun, simple, and crystal clear. Our family values children's church. We see it as a rich and relevant worship environment for a child, as a vibrant supplement for "big church". But not as a substitute for it.

Why?

Because we believe there is no substitute for a child watching his parents model worship. For families, the *with me* of worship matters. What could be more relevant than teaching a young child an appreciation for and familiarity with the cadence and flow of big church? Only in big church will children see their parents model worship through corporate adoration, contemplation, and proclamation of God's worth. Only in big church will children witness and partake in the ordinances of communion and baptism. If

it is true that “more is caught than taught”, parents should value modeling authentic worship for their children more than any lesson that might be taught by a children’s church leader.

But the *with me* of worship is not easy. As parents it is tempting to avoid the complaints of boredom, the distracting foot-shuffling, the endless drink requests, the bulletin origami, or even the reproachful stares of our child-free neighbors by sending our kids to children’s church while we attend worship. Everybody wins: the kids get fun teaching, the church gets extra seats for grown-ups, the grown-ups get to worship unhindered. Perfect. But we’ve missed the point. A dear friend and mentor (who also happens to be a children’s minister) once told me she did not like to hear children referred to as “the church of tomorrow.” Children, she wisely noted, are the church of today.

Indeed.

So to ask the shorter members of the church of today to worship elsewhere so that the rest of us might have a more orderly service doesn’t sound like a very good model for church. And it doesn’t sound like Christ, who called little children to himself in the very midst of the grown-up assembly.

I am thankful that my church does not ask parents to substitute children’s church for big church. With the shortage of space they face each week it’s a wonder they don’t. Unlike the innkeeper in the Advent story, they refuse to say “no room” to those whose lack of stature belies their great importance. To parents wondering how to navigate a Sunday with school-aged kids, here is a suggestion: if possible, let your kids attend both children’s church and big church. If not, choose big church for all. Choose the *with me* of worship. In the long run (and parenting is all about the long run) your family will be richer for it, and no doubt so will your church.

I thought a follow-up post on the “How” might be helpful. While our hearts may urge us to bring our kids to worship, our heads may question exactly how we’re supposed to make that happen. What if my child is a distraction? What if I have to leave the service? Don’t let fear of the unknown keep you from cultivating this vital shared experience for your family – it really is possible to bring small children to Big Church in a way that builds up your children, your family and the church body. Here are a few suggestions that proved helpful to our family as we began transitioning our small kids to Big Church.

Begin with the end in mind.

As parents, we make decisions for our children’s future, not merely for their present. This means we begin with the end in mind, asking the question: “Where do I want my

children to worship when they are adolescents?” Then we think strategically about how to train them to that end. If we wait until they are adolescents to bring them to worship with us, we wait too long to model worship for them and we heighten the unfamiliarity they will feel entering that environment. Far better to ease them into their rightful place in corporate worship during their younger, more teachable years. This might mean that in the short term they sit in a room that does not always engage them at their level. And that’s really okay. Your child may not catch every sermon point, but attending with you is still a huge win because of the modeling they will see and the familiarity they will develop. And you might be surprised by how much they do take away.

Start small, but definitely start.

For our family, the transition to Big Church began at age five. If having your child with you every week in worship feels overwhelming, start with once a month and work your way up to every week. A kindergartner is old enough to sit through a worship service in a respectful and participatory manner as long as a clear expectation has been set, which leads me to...

Set the expectation.

Before coming to Big Church together, explain its purpose to your child: it is a time for believers of all ages to enjoy worshipping God together. It is a place where both children and adults belong. Talk about how long the service will last. Talk about the order for worship: first we greet each other, then we sing, then we listen to the pastor, then we pray. Finally, set specific, age-appropriate expectations along three lines:

Behave-Follow-Listen

1. **Behave** Explain to your child that we behave well during Big Church. We use self-control so we can worship and allow those around us to worship.

- We sit upright (no sleeping) and keep our belongings and hands to ourselves. We try not to wiggle.
- We keep our shoes and socks on.
- We potty and get a drink before and after the service, not during. (Remember to take the child for both of these needs before the service starts.)
- If we must speak to mom or dad, we whisper.

2. **Follow** Explain to your child that we follow along during worship. We do what everyone else is doing as part of sharing worship together.

- We stand when others stand (sit, pray, sing, greet, give, etc.) Help your child meet this expectation by guiding him through the participation process during the

service. Sit where he can see the song lyrics on the screen or share your hymnal with him. Help him turn to the scripture reading, following along with your finger while it is read. If an offering is taken, let your child drop the envelope in the plate or offering box. Model how to pray, sing and greet others.

3. **Listen** Talk to your child about the importance of listening to people who God has placed over us: a teacher, a police officer, a parent. Explain that a pastor is also placed over us by God. We listen to him because he teaches us God's truth. He does this in Big Church during the sermon. When you go to worship, give your child a small, age-appropriate assignment to help her listen to the message:

- "Write down three words you heard that you didn't know."
- "Draw a picture of something the pastor talks about."
- "Write down something true that God showed you through the sermon."

Set them up to win.

Now that you've set an expectation for how you want your child to act in Big Church, take a few steps to help her meet that expectation.

- Have a special "church-only" tote filled with a Bible and noise-free activities for your child to do during the service. If your church does not allow food or drink in the sanctuary, do not bring them for your child. Even if they do allow it, think twice about bringing it from a noise and mess perspective. Leave electronics at home. Make sure your phone is off limits to your child during the service.
- If Children's Church does not teach your children the songs sung in Big Church, burn a CD of them for your child to listen to in the car, during room time, etc. Even better, if your church has its own worship CD, play it so your kids will be familiar with the music.
- If possible, introduce your child to your pastor and worship leader. A child is more likely to *Behave-Follow-Listen* if she feels seen and known by the person leading the service.
- In your early attempts, consider giving a reward for meeting the expectation of *Behave-Follow-Listen*: "If you behave well, follow along and listen during the service we will go for ice cream after church."

Debrief and reinforce.

After attending Big Church together, remember to talk to your child about how it went and what could go differently next week.

- Ask your child for feedback: “What did you learn in church today?” “What was your favorite part of worship?” “Tell me about what you drew.” Talk about what you liked from the sermon in terms they can understand.
- Affirm success: “I liked how you sat quietly and colored, even though the sermon went long today.”
- Correct failure: “Next week I want you to try to wait to ask me questions until after the service.”
- Reset/re-emphasize the expectation of *Behave-Follow-Listen* for next week.
- Reinforce the sermon message: plan a family devotion or service activity to correspond with what the pastor talked about.

Persevere.

Be patient and don't give up! It takes many offerings of leafy greens before a child learns to eat them, and many more before she learns to enjoy and value them. Big Church is also an acquired taste and a learned value. Allow your child time to develop his taste for the spiritual food of corporate worship. The act of worship takes self-control – believers of every age must learn to set aside distractions and devote our full attention to the adoration of God. Self-control takes time to develop for all of us, and especially for children. Give grace during that process. The One you are training them to worship is a patient Father to you. Persevere in training your child to take his rightful place among the community of believers. Before you know it, Big Church will be just the right size for everyone in the family.

Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old: Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.

. *Psalm 78:1-4*