

**THE
BUMPER
BOOK OF
RESOURCES**

ALL-AGE WORSHIP

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	9
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GUIDELINES

For and Against All-age Worship	13
Delivering Good All-age Worship	17
Songs and Hymns	22
Drama Techniques	26
All-age Eucharist	27

FULL SERVICES

ADVENT

Advent	39
Get Ready!	44
Coming, Ready or Not!	49
Getting Things Straight	54
All-age Eucharist for Advent	59

CHRISTMAS

Christmas	64
Christingle	67
Crib Service	72
Christmas Eve – Telling the Story	76
Christmas Day	84
Come! Look Inside	88
A Child Is Born	94
All-age Eucharist for Christmas	98

EPIPHANY

Epiphany	103
Following the Star	105
Gifts	110
Guiding Lights	113
All-age Eucharist for Epiphany	120

CANDLEMAS

Candlemas	125
Bitter-Sweet	128

ASH WEDNESDAY

In a Mess	133
Saying Sorry	137

MOTHERING SUNDAY

Mothering Sunday	142
A Mother's Love	144
All-age Eucharist for Mothering Sunday	148

PALM SUNDAY

Palms and Praises	154
-------------------	-----

MAUNDY THURSDAY

A New Commandment	159
-------------------	-----

GOOD FRIDAY

Good Friday	164
Jesus on the Cross	170

EASTER

Easter	176
Jesus Is Alive	179
All-age Eucharist for Easter	184

ASCENSION

Lifted up	189
-----------	-----

PENTECOST

Pentecost	194
Wind and Fire	196
All-age Eucharist for Pentecost	200

TRINITY SUNDAY

Trinity Sunday	205
Together	207
All-age Eucharist for Trinity Sunday	211

HARVEST

Harvest	216
Abundant Gifts	218
All-age Eucharist for Harvest	222

ALL SAINTS

Blessed	226
All-age Eucharist for All Saints' Day	232

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

Counting the Cost	237
-------------------	-----

TALKS

ADVENT

Jesus' Wrapping	245
Prepare the Way	245
Speechless!	246
Washed Clean	247

CHRISTMAS

The Word of God	248
-----------------	-----

NEW YEAR

Looking to the Future	249
-----------------------	-----

EPIPHANY

The Star	251
All the Nations	252

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Bound Together	253
Though We Are Many	254

LENT

Confessing	256
Six Weeks	257
Multiple Choice	258
Forgive Us Our Trespasses	259
The Price Is Right!	260
Which Way Now?	262

MOTHERING SUNDAY

Getting Dressed	263
Loving Hands	263

PALM SUNDAY

Discovering the Kingdom	267
The Servant King	269
Questions	272
Hosanna!	272

GOOD FRIDAY

The Cross	274
A Plan	274

EASTER

A Miraculous Change!	276
An Astonishing Comeback!	277
Eggs	279
Buns and Eggs	279
Faith Restored	280

ASCENSION	
A Glimpse of Glory	282
Working Together	284

PENTECOST	
Power for Living	285
Experiencing the Unseen	286
Switching on	287
The Power of the Spirit	288

TRINITY	
Beyond Comparison?	289
Trinity Cake	290

ALL SAINTS	
Saints	292

ALL-AGE PRAYERS

ADVENT	
Preparing the Way	295
Hopes and Fears	295

CHRISTMAS EVE	
Circle of Light	297
Crib Service – Starlight	298

CHRISTMAS DAY	
Newborn	299
Light of the World	300

EPIPHANY	
Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh	301
Bethlehem Sky	302

ASH WEDNESDAY	
Bonfire	303

MOTHERING SUNDAY	
Daffodils	304

PALM SUNDAY	
Red Carpet	305
Passion	306

MAUNDY THURSDAY	
Foot-washing	307
Bitter Herbs	307
GOOD FRIDAY	
At the Foot of the Cross	309
EASTER DAY	
Living Crosses	310
Sparklers	311
ASCENSION	
Balloons	312
Cloud of Unknowing	312
PENTECOST	
Prayer Fan	314
TRINITY	
Trinity Plait	315
FATHERS' DAY	
Daddy	316
HARVEST	
Fruits of the Earth	317
A Hidden Harvest Message	318
Looking into Harvest	319
ALL SAINTS	
Open Hands	321
Leaping and Stillness	321
Keeping Going	322
ALL SOULS	
Perennial Prayers	324
REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY	
Rosemary	325

IDEAS AND ACTIVITIES

ADVENT	
The Coming of Love	329
Reading the Signs of the Times	329
The Coming of the Prince of Peace	331
Preparing for the Royal Visit	333

Jesus' Coming Makes the Many One	335
A Library Guide for Bible Sunday	336

CHRISTMAS

The Showing of Love	338
More Than Just Fancy Dress	388

LENT AND HOLY WEEK

The Offering of Love	340
----------------------	-----

EASTER

The Triumph of Love	341
---------------------	-----

PENTECOST

The Giving of Love	342
--------------------	-----

AFTER PENTECOST

The Living of Love	343
--------------------	-----

ALL SAINTS

345

SKETCHES

ADVENT

Family Connections	349
Sandwich-Board Blues	355

CHRISTMAS

Shepherds' Surprise	361
---------------------	-----

EPIPHANY

Welcome to Bethlehem	367
----------------------	-----

LENT

Lions Make Me Nervous	373
-----------------------	-----

PALM SUNDAY

Once in a Life Time	380
---------------------	-----

GOOD FRIDAY

An Innocent Man	386
-----------------	-----

EASTER

Daybreak at the Tomb	392
----------------------	-----

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

401

FOREWORD

The Bumper Book of Resources: All-age Worship is the seventh in the series of Bumper Books. It offers material from a wide range of resources and from top authors to assist those responsible for worship seeking to engage with people across the whole age range. While such services are quite common and often very popular, some worship leaders remain hesitant about attempting what is unfamiliar to them. This Bumper Book, therefore, includes extensive and detailed guidelines to help those new to such worship, as well as to more experienced leaders.

This volume concentrates on material suitable for the main festivals of the Christian year. A further volume is planned which will provide more general material.

The other books in the series are:

Volume 1: Harvest, All Saints, All Souls and Remembrance

Volume 2: Advent, Christmas and Epiphany

Volume 3: Holy Week

Volume 4: Easter, Ascension and Pentecost

Volume 5: Dying, Death and Funerals

Volume 6: Lent, including Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday and Mothering Sunday

GUIDELINES

FOR AND AGAINST ALL-AGE WORSHIP

I am saddened by the many people who say to me, ‘We don’t do all-age worship at our church – it doesn’t work!’ As far as I can see the only reason it doesn’t work is that there are not leaders who want it to work or are committed to working hard to get it right. That may mean fighting the corner for all-age, upsetting those who are against anything that disturbs their traditional understanding of worship, and being willing to give adequate time for preparation and planning.

In the Bible all-age worship worked! Families worshipped together, communities prayed together, and whole nations danced together in praise of God. When Miriam led all the people of Israel in a dance and song of celebration after they had escaped from Egypt through the Red Sea, children mixed with adults as all celebrated the love and power of God. Modern Jews look on the way the Christian church treats children with a mixture of sadness and mystification. If all-age worship worked centuries and millennia ago there is no excuse for us not giving it a shot now!

All-age worship is possible, desirable, and can be excellent.

All-age worship is demanding, challenging, and difficult to deliver.

Many churches struggle with what are known as family or all-age services. It seems that in many cases the need to please one sector of the congregation necessarily alienates and upsets the other. Some churches have completely shied away from all-age services, apparently accepting that God’s family cannot worship together. Others patronise children by giving them things to amuse themselves such as crayons and colouring sheets, allowing them to ignore the worship that is going on around them. Others provide a children’s service that teaches the adults nothing and makes older members of the congregation feel alienated. Others still aim to make part of the service accessible to children, and then dismiss them from the church so that the ‘real’ worship can take place. I accept that it can be difficult, and there are a multitude of special challenges involved in providing good all-age services. I know from experience of taking hundreds over the years that they demand more in preparation and thought than the average adult service. Inevitably a busy minister or vicar will want to go for the easier option, and that is to forget about all-age altogether. Old and young, parents and children are all called to worship, and worship together. There are times when children and adults need to learn separately, although it is worth saying that at such times the children and young people deserve the best provision possible. There are also times when, for the future of the whole church, children and adults must worship and learn together. I believe it can be and should be done – God’s family in a church should be enabled to learn and worship together.

For

Here are a few reasons why all-age worship is important:

1. *Bringing the whole family of the church together – ‘. . . from whom his whole family on heaven and earth derives its name’ (Ephesians 3:15).*

Just like our own families, we may struggle with some individuals. There are those in most churches who don't feel comfortable having children in the church with them, and children who feel alienated from bitter, disapproving older folk! But we all gain from being stretched and having to learn to tolerate and grow with things we initially dislike.

2. *Providing a family atmosphere and sense of belonging for those who are not part of a traditional family unit.*

If we are not careful this can be seen as being about as subtle as killing an ant with a house brick! We are not trying to patronise those who describe themselves as being single, but we are trying to make them and everyone else feel as if they all belong to the church unit. The family of the church should be seen and felt as being bigger than a collection of family units.

3. *Helping adults look at issues in a simplified, uncluttered way that has often got lost within the complexities of the adult world.*

Theologians know all about the Bible, but they don't all have a living faith in God. The essence of the gospel is simple and clear, and there's no harm in seeing it that way once in a while. Those adults who say things like 'That was nice for the children' at the end of a service should be challenged to say what they learned!

4. *Providing children with an opportunity for ministry, and a sense of belonging rather than being shut away somewhere else.*

Some churches have tried sending the adults out of church to small groups and leaving the children in the main church building. This is rarely a popular move, but it does help adults feel the sense of rejection and lack of value which children can feel if sent out of church every week. The main church is usually the most comfortable and expensively furnished space – why should children be excluded from it?

5. *Providing a 'bridge' for unchurched families with a simple but not simplistic service as an introduction to faith.*

We live in a society where unchurched adults have little or no memory of church. In our less literate communities visitors may find that coping with lots of books and bits of paper and long liturgy is from another culture completely. A more relaxed and less structured service can give them a comfortable place to start to learn and understand. It is an exciting and challenging fact that in many churches the all-age service is the best attended service of the month.

6. *Providing suitable teaching for parents to fulfil their responsibility for the spiritual development of their own children – '... train a child in the way he should go' (Proverbs 22:6).*

Let's be clear – it is the parents' responsibility to bring their child up as someone who knows about the faith we share, and they should be willing to sit with them and help them worship during services. But the church can help them by providing a programme of teaching and services which help parents in this respect.

7. *Giving those children's workers who look after groups regularly a chance to worship with the church family.*

This is essential in order for the children's workers to feel that their ministry is of value. They need to be given time to worship with everyone else so that they can recharge their energy and spiritual awareness. But this should not be an excuse for a morning off!

8. *Providing an opportunity for the church and leaders to worship with and learn from the younger church members.*

Children can teach us so much about worship. If we never see the children who are part of our church we never get the opportunity to see God from their point of view, and we miss out. We have so much to learn from children, if only we are willing to do so.

9. *Giving a lesson in tolerance by providing an opportunity for bridges to be built between generations.*

I have often found that those at the top end of the age profile can be much more tolerant of children than those a little younger. Many children likewise have a suspicion about older people, particularly if they have no older relatives. Whatever the situation, it is good for all ages to be challenged and stretched in their acceptance of others!

10. *Giving young people an opportunity to minister.*

All-age services are ideal opportunities for children themselves to take part. They could lead the service, teach a song, do the readings, or lead prayers. They could be included in the planning, or play in a music group. They should not be dragged to the front to sing a little song, as this is about worship and not performance! Many adults are pleasantly surprised when they see children leading and speaking with wisdom and spiritual insight.

Against

There are many problems with all-age worship, and many people would wish to find critical justification to stop all ages in a church worshipping together. Here are some of the criticisms most commonly put forward:

1. *All-age worship is too hard to prepare.*

It does take time, prayer, thought and a real commitment to prepare in order to succeed. I don't see how church leaders can justify spending days working on adult sermons and yet not be able to find time to prepare an appropriate service for all ages or help direct a team of others to do so. After all, the whole church deserves leadership and time, not just the adults.

2. *All-age worship tends towards a shallow depth of teaching.*

'Simple' does not necessarily mean 'shallow'! A simple message can help everyone. Most churches only have all-age services every few weeks, and therefore the adults are not going to suffer too much without their weekly dose of theology! Deep theology does not make a good Christian, but a willingness to listen to God does. All all-age services need to focus on one message which is interpreted and made appropriate to all the age groupings represented . . . and it can be done!

3. *All-age worship revolves around silly songs.*

This is nonsense, an excuse used by the ignorant and the bigoted! It does not take noisy, clappy songs alone in order for children to worship. While it is important to make sure that words are appropriate, it is also possible to include songs to which adults can relate. Again, simplicity in worship can be a great help or even a liberation for many adults.

4. *All-age services are too active.*

Since when did worship become a passive spectator activity? Worship is about taking part, demonstrating our love for God, and using our whole being to tell him how much we love

him. We should expect to be active and rejoice that God makes it possible to express our worship in so many ways. And even if we are not comfortable with the way some people worship, we have no right to criticise or say that it is in some way inferior.

5. *All-age services tend to be too long.*

This one is a fair criticism of many services in many churches. Children (and we adults if we are honest!) can't take too much in at one time. There is much to be gained by making all-age services shorter than other services – the short, snappy ones are often those that are best remembered. A little time at the end provides more opportunities for people to mix and communicate, and there is nothing better than the feeling that things have finished early and we have some unexpected free time!

6. *All-age services are not suitable for anyone.*

All-age services are really difficult to get right. They need to be prepared and led by people who have appropriate gifts, the aim being not to do a 'children's service' but to give children a positive image of God's church meeting together. In some cases it may mean that the church leader or those who usually lead services have to accept that their gifts are not suited to leading all-age, and then to invite others with suitable gifts to do them instead. To do an all-age service that meets the needs of the majority takes care, balance and a great deal of prayer. It really does need to be good!

7. *Children do not behave during all-age services.*

Most children who come to church for all-age services attend with at least one parent. It is the parental responsibility to look after the children, direct their attention to the worship and keep them from being too disruptive. As the father of two young boys I know this is a challenge! The bottom line is that the leader of all-age worship should not be expected to 'entertain' the children or discipline them from the front . . . they have got enough to do without that. Ultimately children are more likely to behave if the content of the service is appropriate to them.

Nick Harding

DELIVERING GOOD ALL-AGE WORSHIP

Before looking in detail at the ingredients which go into a good all-age service, there are a few other issues about presentation and delivery to be considered. Many are very basic, while others are important but often forgotten or ignored. The fact is that in many churches the congregation, or at least the members of the congregation who have power and authority, are more likely to criticise all-age services than other services. They may be willing to put up with the dulllest service from the most tedious of preachers and leaders without a murmur, but bring a few children into the pews around them and they will be on the lookout for the slightest glitch! In some churches there may even be members of the congregation who have a particular axe to grind and will be willing you to fail. These suggestions may help you avoid some of the main faults common in all-age services.

Visual aids and gimmicks

‘You’re the man with a bird in a box,’ said a small girl in the queue at a very busy fast-food restaurant where I had gone with my boys. I smiled and said ‘Oh yes, you mean Cheryl the crow.’ Feeling slightly embarrassed, I continued to chat with the child and her parents, but as the conversation took its course I realised that she had remembered lots about the colour and sound of the puppet, but nothing about what I was trying to communicate through it. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it reminded me that everything I use should carry a clear message.

Visual aids, tricks and gimmicks do have a part to play in worship. Many of us remember services and talks which had something visual to attract and retain our attention. However, we must be sure that anything we use is visible to the whole congregation, even those at the back and the smallest children. Try kneeling behind a pew or chair to get an idea what children can see! If we have a good idea for a visual aid or something else to get attention we must make sure that it is clearly in line with the theme of the service, not something we are trying to squeeze in for the sake of it. And we should ensure that the visual item does not obscure the message of the service, leaving an abiding memory of something bright or interesting but no idea of what it was meant to say about God!

Audibility

I learned an important lesson about audibility many years ago when, at the end of an all-age service in a church I had never visited before, a glowing old lady came to speak to me. She was the sort of person who shone her faith, and I expected a positive and encouraging comment. This is what she said: ‘Thank you, young man. It looked very good, but unfortunately I couldn’t hear a word. Try slowing down a little, and remember those of us whose faculties are not as young as yours.’ I felt admonished and encouraged in one – and I knew she was right.

It goes without saying that everyone in the congregation needs to hear what is going on. If you are to get young people involved in the service they need to be loud, their speech needs to be paced, and they need training and practice in how to use the PA system properly. Even if

you are leading a service on your own and have a loud voice many churches now insist on use of the PA for those with loop settings on hearing aids. Different sectors of the congregation will turn off or their eyes glaze over if the service is either too loud or too quiet, if the PA speakers squeal, or if the leader seems to be beaten by the vagaries of wiring!

Children and young people

Any children and young people used in the service should participate with integrity, and not as token gestures or as performing monkeys! Dragging on the Sunday school to sing a twee song during a service should have died out many years ago, but sadly still survives. It may look pretty, it may encourage fringe people such as the children's parents or other relatives to attend, it may even be delightful and inspire an 'Ahhhh' from the congregation, but it is not worship! It is patronising to the children concerned to be used in such a way. It fails adults who should be worshipping with the children, not gawping at them as spectators. If children and young people are involved in the service they should be treated with due respect, and seen as valid contributors.

Length

This is a real problem. Some churches see all-age services as an opportunity to strip the service of anything not deemed to be essential, and consequently go for a minimalist approach which lacks depth. Others try to include everything that every other service has as well as adding in more songs, talks and visuals. As with most things, somewhere in the middle is an ideal service and perfect length!

An all-age service needs to follow a pattern, even if there is a great deal of flexibility within it. The service needs to be long enough to include key elements, while being short enough to keep all ages actively and attentively participating. Some adults may feel short-changed if it is too short, while younger people may feel bored and alienated if it is too long. All churches have their own ideas, but I would suggest that 45 minutes is ample for most all-age services.

Theme and message

I have taken to writing the theme of a service on a large sheet of paper, and placing it on the wall facing me when I am planning. From time to time I look at the theme and think through every element of the service to see if it fits, and occasionally I get it right!

The theme and message need to be clear, both in the planning and the delivery of a service. It is easy to get bogged down with a great visual or practical idea and lose sight of the original message being given. The theme should be evident in the songs, liturgy, prayers, readings and talk, and the service should aim at leaving worshippers of all ages with one clear and well-defined key message, not lots of disparate ideas. They will not necessarily see all the links straight away, but you will have at least given them a few pointers.

Language

It is of little use leading all-age services with a multitude of long, 'religious' words, or by using language which brings everything down to what we think is the right level for a 5-year-old! It is very easy to patronise all the congregation by talking down to some for the benefit of others. Great care needs to be taken to avoid out-of-date words and catchphrases, while keeping the language relevant and appropriate. This takes plenty of practice, and inevitably leads to mistakes and misunderstandings. But a new look at language can be refreshing and revitalising.

Mixing

I once went to a church where the young (anyone under 40) sat on the left, and everyone else sat on the right. After trying a few jokes and activities to crack the ice it became apparent that there was something political going on. This church was not one but two. Two clear factions, each of whom viewed the other with mistrust and dislike, had been formed due to disagreements over styles of worship. Now the two sides avoided any sense of worshipping together with any depth.

The congregation needs to mix physically at some point during the service, whether it be to greet each other, discuss things, or pray in small groups. Some have a time called 'sharing the peace' and move around, shaking hands or (heaven forbid!) hug! But there are still others who fail to show any form of togetherness and unity and struggle to leave their seats, let alone actually smile! I think it is fair to encourage all the members of the congregation to greet others and work together during services, breaking down the barriers of age and tradition. No particular age group finds this easy to begin with, but all benefit in the long run.

Variety

You may have noticed how short individual scenes on TV are. We are used to fast-moving images and information being given to us in a wide range of ways.

All services need a touch of variety, all-age services particularly so. You should be looking to having a range of voices involved so that the whole service does not fall on to one person. There should be different things happening, loud and quiet, participatory and passive activities, things to look at and thing to do. Through a range of voices and styles in the one service many needs will be met and the varied ways people learn best will be attended to.

Accessibility

I visited a church recently on a Sunday when I was not preaching. On the way in I was handed two books and three other pieces of paper. Fortunately I knew my way around the paperwork, but as an 'unchurched' visitor I would have been lost and embarrassed.

If all-age services are used as a 'bridge' for people on the fringe or outside the church, or are going to be attractive to young people, they need to be as accessible as possible. This has implications on the amount of paper worshippers are given as they arrive, the welcome they receive, and the whole atmosphere created by the leader. A special effort needs to be made to ensure that no knowledge or understanding is assumed, while also avoiding boring regular worshippers. We must keep asking ourselves, 'How accessible is this for strangers?'

Directions

It is very easy to make too many assumptions about where the congregation should turn to or what they should read when leading a service. We may know very well what page to look at for a prayer, that the congregation only read out the passages in bold, or that hymn 237 is in the red 'Hymns Ancient and Mouldy' and not the yellow, the blue, or the green books also in the pews! The problem comes when we are trying so hard to keep an element of pace and movement in the service that we forget to explain the basics or allow time for others to catch up with our thinking. What to us may seem like spoon-feeding will be to others a support and comfort, and help the younger members of the congregation keep up.