

WELCOMING FAMILIES IN WORSHIP



AUDIT + REFLECTION GUIDE

Prepared by Welcoming Families, a task group of the Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island's Youth and Family Ministry Vision Strategy and Support Team.

YOUTH
AND FAMILY
MINISTRY



Written and produced in 2022 for the Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island
by the Welcoming Families Task Group.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This resource was developed by and for people living and doing ministry in Mi'ma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.

As you reflect on how your congregation can be more welcoming to families, take time to reflect and give thanks for the ways in which settlers have been welcomed on this territory, and continue to seek ways to work towards reconciliation by honouring that hospitality and honouring the people of this land.



INTRODUCTION

Ask any parent, and they will tell you that families make children's interests a top priority and do everything they can to support their children's personal development. That includes more than the arts and sports! Although they don't always have the language for it, parents are also concerned about the spiritual development of their children.



Many occasions and circumstances might bring a family to church, such as the baptism of a child, the funeral of a loved one, or worship on a holiday like Christmas or Easter. These brief encounters sometimes lead to regular participation in parish life, but more often not, which can leave congregations wondering why they don't return.

Each family is unique, with its own cultural and spiritual history, but they all want a place of belonging, and that's what they are looking for when they come to church. A positive first impression can lead a visiting family to consider whether a parish might become their spiritual home. On the flip side, one negative experience can dampen their interest for a long time. If we want families to feel at home, we need to be ready to show them that we are ready to welcome and include them. It's on us to make a good first impression.

But our commitment to include families must go well beyond the first encounter. Any parish can offer newcomers a wide range of opportunities to deepen their faith as a family, by considering how to intentionally include children, young people, and adults in worship and parish life. This doesn't mean changing everything. Each parish has a culture and its own cherished traditions, services, and special events. We don't need to get rid of that, but we do need to make space for families to participate. In fact, the events we cherish and do well are often draws for families. We just need to make them welcome.

This resource exists to help parishes equip themselves so that, when families join them, they can be prepared. Although many of the parishes would already consider themselves welcoming, expressing this welcome requires some hard thinking and some hands-on prep work, and you may not know where to start. This is an "audit." It is a tool for helping you assess your current practices more clearly, and for suggesting directions of growth.

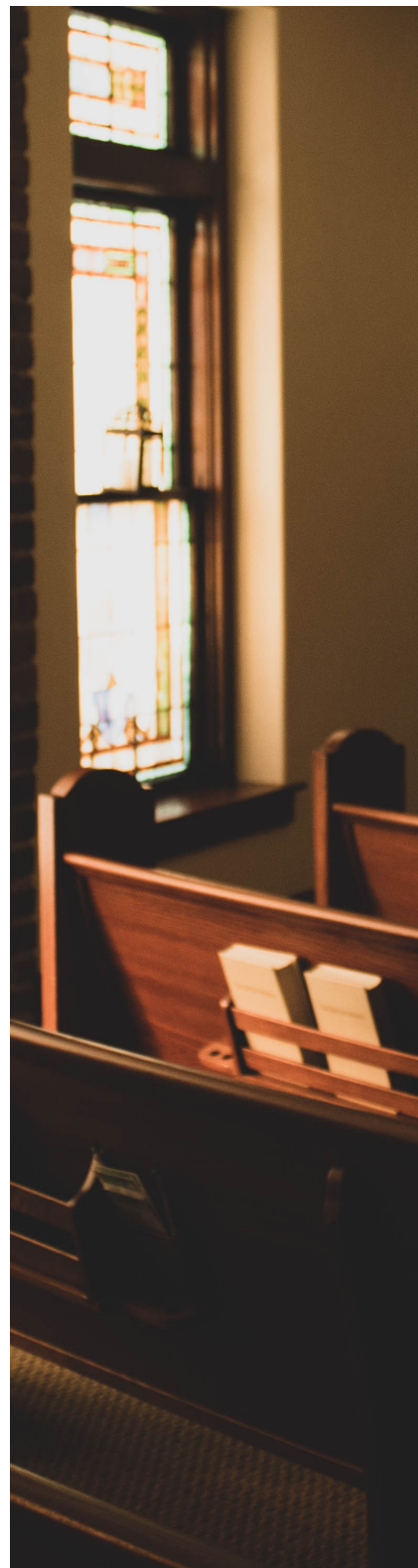
In each section, you will find a reflection on one aspect of welcoming families, followed by questions for you to reflect on (ideally as a group), and a checklist to assess where your parish is right now and where there is work to be done. Don't feel that you need to rush through it! Give each section ample time for reflection and implementation. Remember that this will be an ongoing process, so not everything needs to be accomplished immediately. Decide what things are the top priorities, set realistic timelines, and go from there. And, throughout your work, keep the main goal in mind: we want children and families to feel that they belong in the church, as full participants in the body of Christ. Their presence will be a significant blessing to the growth and life of the church.

CULTURE OF WELCOME

The culture of your church community is the foundation for everything having to do with welcoming families, which makes addressing your congregational culture a good place to start—a good place, but not necessarily an easy one.

Reflecting on the culture of a community is challenging for many reasons. Many aspects of culture are hard to pin down with words, and the hard reality that there is often a difference between what we believe our culture is and what it actually is.

In many ways, all the sections of this audit and reflection guide touch on various expressions of culture, of who you are as a church community. So, in this section, we'll start with a broad look at what a culture of welcome might look like and offer some suggestions on how to assess the current reality of your community.



What is a Culture of Welcome?

For this audit, when we say “a culture of welcome”, we mean a culture that is warm, welcoming, and inviting to all who connect to it, whether it is the very first time someone is entering the church for Sunday morning worship, or if they have been an active part of the life of the community for fifty years. A church with a culture of welcome is one where members of the community are generous in their practice of hospitality with others, where people care for one another, and where they honour others in a way that reflects that every person is a beloved child of God and an invaluable part of the body of Christ.

A culture of welcome is about more than just offering a nice feeling for folks who enter church on a Sunday morning. A call to care for, honour, and serve one another is deeply rooted in our faith, and should be part of all that we are and all that we do as Christians.

Start with Honesty

When you reflect on the culture of welcome present in your church community, it's important to be honest about what that current culture is, and that can be difficult. In churches, there is often a tendency to want to say the polite thing and to not ruffle any feathers, but if you aren't ruthlessly honest about what's happening, all the work that is done through this audit will be based on something other than the reality of your context and won't help move your community forward in a meaningful way.

Of course, you shouldn't go about this in a way that would be harmful to your community. In fact, if everyone involved practices hospitality with one another even when it is difficult, graciously offering and receiving open and honest reflections on the truth, not only will your

reflections be valuable in moving forward in a good direction, but the experience itself will also have been worthwhile.

As you do all this work, steep the work and process in prayer. Invite God to help you seek out what is honest and true as you reflect on where you are at and look ahead to where you might be called. Pray for the others who are doing this work alongside you and pray for your whole community. Again, not only will this strengthen and support this work, but it's also a way of living out being a community that cares for one another.

Look for Both Strengths and Growing Edges

As you reflect on where you are now, and what might be needed, be mindful of both your strengths and your growing edges. Your strengths are the things that your community does well—maybe you have time after worship every week where folks can have a drink and a snack and connect with one another in a less formal way than they can in worship, or maybe you have a solid team of greeters who welcome everyone who enters your church and connects them with someone else to help guide them through the service. There are lots of big and small ways that many church communities already live out a culture of welcome.

While it's important to not diminish those strengths, it's important to not assume that having a few solid strengths means you are already there. Every community is a work in progress on this culture of welcome. God is always making things new, so seek out your growing edges too. Growing edges are the opportunities for your culture of welcome to continue to expand and to grow. There might be things that are already happening but are a bit lackluster, or it might be that new opportunities have emerged that you haven't even begun to think about yet.

If you feel like you have some significant strengths already, a way to push further to find some growing edges is to consider how you can go beyond just offering a welcome. How can you show a sense of gratitude for the gift of the presence of new folks, or a sense that not only are they welcome, but that you have prepared for them?

Culture, Not Programs

Remember throughout your reflections in this section that this is about culture—not about your programs. Your culture will inform and shape what programs you offer. The time will come to look at those programs, but it's not time just yet. For now, stay focused on the culture of your church community, who you are, how you relate to one another, how you relate to new people, and what your practices are. Start with that, and the rest will flow from there.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When you think of the culture of your church community, what comes to mind?

2. Many churches refer to themselves as feeling like a family. In what ways is this true for your church community? Are there any specific and intentional ways that you care for one another and share life together? How can you extend those practices to new families who may become part of your community?

3. Reflect on a time when you were in an unfamiliar situation. What things helped you to feel welcomed, prepared for, or cared for in that situation? Was there anything that made you feel more out of place than you did at first?

4. Thinking about your congregation's strengths and growing edges, reflect on the tangible ways you currently express a culture of welcome to newcomers, and whether there are ways that your church makes people feel *unwelcome*.

CHECKLIST

Check column A if this is something that your congregation has already done—great job!

Check column B if this is something that you would like to commit to working on in the near future.

Check column C if this is something that you will look at another time.

Note: Don't be discouraged if you don't have very many checks in the A column! Every congregation has growing edges and identifying them is a great first step.

	A	B	C
Do you have people designated to welcome people to worship and find out what resources, supports, or information might be helpful for them?			
Does your hospitality show special attention to details, so that each particular guest or family of guests feels honoured and valued?			
Is your congregation genuinely enthusiastic about having young people in church?			

	A	B	C
If a new family comes to church, will they be greeted joyfully and respectfully by people other than the official greeters?			
Are there other members of the congregation who might be interested in the specific role of helping newcomers through the worship service?			
Do you have someone who can follow up on that welcome outside of Sunday worship?			
Are there any specific ministries, events, or resources currently offered that invite newcomers to learn more about your church community?			

NOTES

COMMUNICATIONS



The Big Picture

How we present ourselves says a lot about what we do and don't value. In many in-person contexts we are familiar with how this works. Think of how we can show respect or disrespect to someone by seriously over-dressing or under-dressing for their event, or how we can communicate disinterest or arrogance by talking too little or too much at a meeting.

What do our external publications—that's everything from the website and Facebook page to the sign on the church lawn—communicate about the church and its values? The ideal is for them to communicate that the parish is a living community, full of people who care about the church and the neighborhood, ready to welcome new people, and attentive to the needs people might have if they come to visit. When people look up our websites, we want them to think, "These people care about their community, and they care about connecting with new people like me." When a family who is

nervous about bringing children to church looks us up, we want them to see that we love having children in church, and that we already have a plan for welcoming and supporting them.

Good Enough ... But for Whom?

Most parishes have established ways of communicating with one another: things like a weekly email list, a Facebook group, or a word-of-mouth network. These methods probably work well enough for getting information to people who are already connected, so we tend to forget about the other people who are not already connected. We focus on internal communications, and forget about external communications, the things that the public sees. Our ways of communicating information may be “good enough for us,” but not “good enough for newcomers.” If that’s the case, potential visitors and new families will get the message that the church hasn’t considered them very much—and they’ll be right!

First Contact is Digital

When we imagine “meeting” a visitor to the church, we mostly think of in-person services and activities. But in today’s digital world, almost no one gets to that stage who hasn’t already checked us out online. Before we ever “meet” someone, they will already have formed an idea of our church culture and values through our websites especially, but also through our public Facebook pages and other social media. Making a good first impression in-person can positively affect these assumptions, but if we have no online presence—or a sloppy, disorganized, and unhelpful online presence, which might be even worse than none at all—we will probably never get to that stage. Especially in rural areas where it is well known that churches are closing, not having an active website can easily be interpreted as a sign that the church is no longer open!

Some parishes understand this, but they rely on their Facebook page to provide the first point of contact. This approach has a few drawbacks. First, Facebook is increasingly a social media platform for the middle-aged and seniors: young people and families are decreasingly likely to use Facebook, and decreasingly likely to think that organizations which promote themselves exclusively through Facebook are “with it” and care about connecting with young people. Second, although it is possible to include a small amount of important information at the top of a Facebook page, Facebook’s format prioritizes showing recent community interactions, which is helpful to community members, but not very helpful to newcomers who may feel that they have to “dig” through past posts to find information that is relevant to them. Third, online community interactions don’t always give a good first impression. Even posts about church business which are friendly and polite can give the impression to an outsider of “listening in” to a private conversation. Your welcome should be addressed to newcomers directly. Fourth, some parishes use Facebook groups rather than Facebook pages, but groups usually require people to request to join before they can see information or interact, which creates an unwelcoming insiders/outside dynamic.

The best way to go remains to have an attractive and up-to-date website. Developing this kind of website requires at least a little bit of expertise—and if this seems daunting for a small parish, that is understandable! But there are lots of ways to overcome the challenges of setting up a website. If you have even one person who may not know how to design a website, but is willing to learn, there are lots of resources online about how to get started, and this might be a way to get someone involved who feels more comfortable doing behind-the-scenes work. The diocese also can provide support to host your parish website as a page on the bigger diocesan website, if making your own seems unmanageable. It can also be worth it to

make a one-time investment to hire a professional to design a simple website for you which requires few or no regular updates. If you don't know, ask! There is lots of help available for creating and maintaining a website.

Besides its specific content, a good website should show that the church is alive. It shows this by having good-quality, recent photos of church events (with proper consent for publishing people's photos, of course), by having only up-to-date information, and by having an attractive and modern design.

What do people need to know?

But a website isn't just a piece of art: it's a practical place for finding information. Some information is obviously necessary: your address, contact information, and service times. But going beyond that requires putting yourself in the shoes of potential visitors. What is important to them? What do they want to know? Providing clear, succinct, and easy-to-find information about the questions that your visitors have is a way of showing that you have taken them into consideration and value them. It's about empathetically imagining the concerns of potential visitors.

For example, what does a family with children want to know? They probably want to know whether you have a children's program and what it is like if you have one, what your service is like and how children can participate in it, whether there is a change table in the bathroom and a ramp for a stroller up to the front door, and whether there are social and spiritual enrichment activities for their children and teens beyond just Sunday mornings. Even if you have no children's or youth programming, it shows that you have thought of families just to express that children are welcome.

Not Just the Website

There are places besides the website where we publish information to present ourselves to newcomers, which should receive the same level of consideration. Posters and brochures for events and programmes often say a lot about our congregational culture, specifically whether we care enough about outreach to make our advertisements simple and attractive. But our most important printed publications are our service bulletins. Here it is especially important to think how an outsider with no previous worship experience would react to our bulletin. We know how to follow the complex list of the parts of the service and the corresponding page numbers in the liturgy book and the hymnal, but that doesn't mean that outsiders will. (For more on this specific topic, see "The Spiritual Significance of Church Bulletins," Covenant Blog, April 3, 2019.)

Don't underestimate the value of a traditional church sign. Having a beautiful, up-to-date sign on your lawn with the times of services and the address of the church website shows that the church is alive and well. If you have an old church sign which is out-of-date and in bad repair, though, that shows exactly the opposite.

Every geographic community has different ways that people find out about local events. Some places rely a lot on posters in cafes, shops, and grocery stores. Others have well-used social media pages. Many communities will use both posters and social media, and perhaps other forums as well. If your church wants to connect with people, you need to know where people connect. The most reliable approach, especially for events that you especially want people to come to is to use every available medium of communication at the same time.

Conclusion

When a new individual or family is considering a visit to our church, we want our first encounter between that person and our published information to communicate that we value our church and that they are welcome to join it. Designing a website to be more informative and attractive, curating activity on a Facebook page, and re-working a church bulletin are all ways that we can shift from an insiders-focused culture of communication to an outsiders-focused culture, a culture of welcome.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Where do you go for information about organizations you haven't been in contact with before, such as retailers, restaurants, community groups, or government agencies? Discuss good and bad experiences you've had making "first contact" with a new group. What can the church learn from those experiences?

2. How do you think your parish community would react if you changed the ways you communicate with the outside world, such as changing protocols around posting in the church Facebook group, changing the church sign, or changing the church bulletin? If that would cause tension, how would you address that? If that would be met with indifference, how can you get people excited about revamping your public presentation?

3. Put yourself in the place of different sorts of individuals and families who might be considering visiting your church and perhaps attending regularly. Brainstorm what each of those families would be interested to know before they visited for the first time.

CHECKLIST

Check column A if this is something that your congregation has already done—great job!

Check column B if this is something that you would like to commit to working on in the near future.

Check column C if this is something that you will look at another time.

Note: Don't be discouraged if you don't have very many checks in the A column! Every congregation has growing edges and identifying them is a great first step.

	A	B	C
Does your church have a website?			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is it up to date (address, service times, contact info, program information)? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is it attractive? Is it easy to navigate? Does it function well on a smartphone or tablet? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For all photos posted on the website, do you have permission from the person who took the photo as well as all the people in the photo (or their parents in the case of children)? 			

	A	B	C
Does your website include information relevant to families, such as:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether or not there is a Sunday school? If there is a Sunday school, what is involved and how/when do children go to it? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What your services are like? Are children welcome in worship? What resources or supports are there for keeping them happy and interested? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do children receive communion in your congregation? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have a children's and/or teens program during the week? How can older children and teens get involved in parish activities? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the main entrance stroller accessible? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a change table in the washroom? Is there a children's corner and/or nursing or bottle-feeding area somewhere? 			

	A	B	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Screening and safeguarding measures and practices in place for leaders who work with children, youth, and vulnerable people?			
Is your bulletin easy to follow? Is it attractive, self-explanatory, simple, and free from unnecessary distractions?			
If you have a Facebook page, would someone seeing it for the first time get the sense of an organized, kind, warm, outward-looking community?			

GREETING

Greeting a New Family:

When we think of “greeting” in a church context, we may think of St. Paul’s greetings in his letters. Paul identified who he was and why he was writing and made sure that the Christian nature of his letter was front-and-centre, because his goal was to build and nurture the Christian community.



How are families greeted when they enter your church? Does the greeting have Christian character and is it conducive to building and nurturing Christian community? Is it personal and specific? Or is it overwhelming and distracted—or is there any greeting at all?

Not having any sort of greeting can leave new families, and especially families not accustomed to church, feeling lost or unsure. A trained greeter or team of greeters can be helpful in welcoming and orienting families to the worship space. Recognizing each member of the family in a warm and hospitable way, with a friendly smile and a kind word, goes a long way in helping people feel welcome, and more confident as books or other worship materials are handed out and explained.

It is also helpful to let folks coming into worship for the first time to know where washroom facilities are located, and, as appropriate, where to find a change table, comfortable chair for breast-feeding or bottle-feeding, children's books, activities, or playroom. When there is Sunday School or other kids program running at the same time as worship, the family should be both made aware, and, with parental permission, the child made welcome into the appropriate program. If there will be a Children's Talk or Children's Sermon, the greeter should explain what usually happens during that time, especially if the leader might call upon the children to participate. As well, it would be good to find out if the Church can support the family in any other way not mentioned. As the greeter provides information and materials, there should always be opportunity for connection and conversation. Even though this seems like a lot, this can all be explained succinctly—and it probably should, because we also don't want to overwhelm new folks!

Even as familiar families make their way into church, it is good to offer more than a "good morning." Asking family members how they have been and if there is anything they need shows that you care. For families who have recently started attending regularly, greeters can play the important role of letting people know that their presence has been noticed and remembered. Greeters can also help people make connections, saying things like, "It's great to have you back! Have you met so and so yet?" Engaging newcomers actively can help avoid the impression that there is an "inside group" which is for long-time attendees only.

That said, the greeting should not end with the "official" greeters. Members of the congregation should extend the warmth of that initial greeting by welcoming new families as they bump into them, which often happens as people are sitting down. Unless they are reserved for specific guests or people participating in the service (in

which case they should be labeled), empty pews should be available for any family, rather than treated as if those pews “belonged” to people who haven’t shown up yet. It is kind for church members to invite newcomers to sit in a pew with them and provide guidance through the service. Far too often, one or two people sit on the end of a pew and act as a barrier to the space on the other side of them, and people coming into the church do not feel welcome there; that says, “Don’t sit next to me!” Offering to slide further down the pew to make room is simple and generous. Literally and metaphorically making room for others can shift us out of our comfort zones a little bit—but it’s an important practice for our communities.

A worship leader too can help new families feel included by making a general announcement to welcome everyone into the service. Unless the worship leader and family have a prior agreement, it is best to not single out new families to introduce them during a service. It is more kind to invite and remind the congregation to take time to speak to someone they have not yet met whenever the most appropriate time is, for example after the service.

Conclusion

A greeting, given in a kind, friendly, and inclusive manner, is important for helping families feel welcome and building a healthy community.

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. Are families greeted as they enter your place of worship? If so, how? Are children included in the greeting? Are there areas where the greeting can be improved to help all members of the family feel included and welcome to worship?

CHECKLIST

Check column A if this is something that your congregation has already done—great job!

Check column B if this is something that you would like to commit to working on in the near future.

Check column C if this is something that you will look at another time.

Note: Don't be discouraged if you don't have very many checks in the A column! Every congregation has growing edges and identifying them is a great first step.

	A	B	C
Does your church have trained greeters?			
Are trained greeters aware of what is going on the service, well enough to succinctly and show people how to follow along?			
If families come in with babies, do you kindly mention where the change table is located, that breast-feeding and other means of feeding infants are welcome, and indicate there is a rocking chair or other comfortable place, if desired? (When such options are available.)			

	A	B	C
If there is Sunday School, another activity, or place for children to play or learn, are parents informed and children warmly invited to join with their parents' permission?			

NOTES



WORSHIP

The Big Picture

Worship is the central vocation of the church. Everything else that the church does flows out of the encounter with God that happens when we gather together to pray, to praise, to ask forgiveness, and to receive God's gifts of word and sacrament. The liturgy makes us who we are as the body of Christ—and this means that the way we worship says a lot about what we think church is and who it's for. If we worship in a way that doesn't allow for the developmental needs of children and families, we are effectively saying that church isn't for them.

But it is for them! God calls all people to know him through Jesus Christ, and anyone may become a part of the body of Christ through baptism, young or old. Making our worship welcoming to families is about making sure that people of all life stages, including infants,

children, and parents, are given permission and support to be present and engage with the service in a way that suits their developmental stage and the practical realities of their lives.

Making worship welcoming isn't about which book you use or what style of worship. It's about an attitude which embraces families and sees them as a valuable part of the whole worshiping body of Christ. Some churches struggle with allowing kids to be kids, seeing them as "distractions" or "noisy." Other churches might be so keen to serve "them," thinking of kids and families as "others" who need to be singled out with an over-the-top welcome, that they forget to treat families in just the same way that they treat everyone else who comes through the door: as full participants in worship.

Seen But Not Heard?

Anglican worship has traditionally valued focus as a primary way for the congregation to engage in worship. We are expected to focus on the readings, to focus and listen attentively when the sermon comes along, and to focus again in prayer when the eucharist is consecrated. In this context, it makes a lot of sense why so many Anglican churches have, consciously or unconsciously, developed the attitude that children should be "seen but not heard." If unbroken focus is the most important way of engaging in worship, children making noise will be seen as a distraction, and even as evidence of rudeness toward all the mature adults who are trying their best to focus on the service. But children make noise. It is just a fact. And if we see children as distractions, it will be very hard to see them as full participants in worship. We will place a tremendous burden on parents to keep their kids quiet, and eventually most of them will give up and either find a church where their kids are more welcome or will stop attending church altogether because it's too difficult.

Fortunately, there are lots of aspects of worship which are not just about maintaining unbroken focus on what is said up at the front. We praise God by lifting our voices in song—this is vocal engagement. We adopt postures that embody an attitude of prayer, such as standing to praise, kneeling to pray, and sitting to listen, and we embody our journey toward God when we process to the altar to receive communion—this is physical engagement. We eat and drink, light candles, make the sign of the cross—this is ritual engagement. Some churches even add “nasal engagement” by lighting incense so that we can worship with our noses!

The point is that worship is about so much more than being quiet and focusing. Even if children can't always be quiet, they can engage in worship in other ways. It is an act of worship even just to choose to be in the house of God, so we might say that an infant worships simply by being present. Children worship when they express (sometimes verbally, sometimes by moving around) their interest in their surroundings. Children worship when they sing or hum along to the hymns, even if they don't know the words or the tune. Children worship when they get excited about walking (or even running) up the aisle at communion time. Making children participants in worship is about letting them engage, as much as you can, in these basic ways, even if some of them make a little noise.

The single biggest thing a church can do to make this happen is to give children and families permission to move around the worship space. When a child gets antsy in the pew, that's okay! Kids weren't made to sit still. Let parents know that it's okay to take their children for a little walk around the church. Maybe they'll do a little tour to look at the stained-glass windows or plaques. Maybe they'll move to a children's corner at the back. Maybe they just need to stand up and pace a little. It's okay.

But as we've said, the fundamental change that needs to happen in many churches is one of attitude. It's easy to think that we can keep to ourselves what we think of the children who join us for worship, but in fact we tend to let them know. Families who are welcome will know it by the warmth of the other worshippers, and by the congregation's unconcern about the children's little noises. On the other hand, families will know if they are not welcome because of the disapproving looks we instinctively give them when their children make noises, and by the way that we sometimes put the service on little pauses while we wait for children to quiet down. Changing this attitude requires a strong commitment from clergy and lay leaders, and a willingness to examine ourselves.

Despite all we've said about children being allowed to make some noise in worship, we don't need to be terribly worried about things getting out of hand with noisy children. No parent wants their child to make a scene and will almost always have the courtesy to temporarily leave the worship space if a child is having a real tantrum. Allowing children to be up and moving around often means that they are quieter, ultimately, because they do not need to complain about being glued to their seat. Allowing kids to be kids doesn't mean sacrificing the value of focus in worship entirely. It just means being open to other ways of engaging as well.

Singled Out

Some congregations have a different problem: they are so enthusiastic about actively welcoming children in worship, that they make them the centre of attention in a way that can be embarrassing, intimidating, and ultimately alienating.

It is wonderful to verbally let families and children, both visitors and long-time attendees, know that they are welcome and valued.

Sometimes “singling out” families to give them a specific greeting can be a sign that they are noticed and welcomed. But it is very easy to cross a line and unintentionally put those families on display in a way that creates awkwardness and embarrassment. Think of these two scenarios:

1. At the start of the service, the rector notices that there is a new family with children in the pews. So, when she is welcoming the congregation, she says, “I see that we have a new family here this morning. I want you to know that you are very welcome here, and we are so glad that you have brought your children to church. They are a treasure from God. Church, let’s make sure that we introduce ourselves when we gather for coffee at the end of the service.”
2. At the start of the service, the rector notices that there is a new family with children in the pews. She says, “I see that we have a new family here this morning. Why don’t you stand up and tell us your names?” The family, surprised, quickly picks up the baby and wipes granola crumbs off the toddler’s face and stands up. Everyone in the church turns to look at them. After they say their names, the rector says, “Aren’t we so glad that we have this family here with us? Let’s show them how glad we are that they’re here,” and then gets the congregation to clap.

In the first scenario, the rector acknowledges the presence of a new family, warmly welcomes them and their children specifically, and encourages the church to be hospitable without putting unexpected pressure on that family to “show off.” This is excellent. In the second scenario, the rector makes that family the centre of attention when they aren’t prepared for it. Even worse, she establishes a very strong “us/them” dynamic in which “we” clap for and celebrate “them.” The more enthusiastic welcome actually makes the family feel more like they don’t belong, like they were being welcomed as a guest into

someone else's space rather than being treated as a potential new member of the family.

Interactions like scenario two happen too often in our churches. It's not just at the start of the service, either. We often end up putting kids on display when we are over-excited about getting them actively involved in worship. Children in particular are put on display particularly often, especially at the "children's talk" in congregations which have one. These talks often become more about letting the congregation count the children in attendance, about appreciating how cute the children are, about assessing the rector's ability to interact with kids, or about the rector anticipating the themes of the sermon, than they are about giving meaningful engagement to the children present. This happens at other points in the service as well, especially when children are asked to make a presentation or performance.

In all these cases, it is not necessarily the activity that is the problem—in theory good children's talks exist, and in theory a children's choir should be able to perform a song—but the problem is an unhelpful attitude. We should always ask ourselves, "Is this more about giving children something meaningful to do, or is this about building up the congregation's ego?" If it's about putting kids on display for our sake, to make us feel better about our own church because we are "so welcoming," instead of being about providing a genuine and appropriate welcome, we shouldn't do it. In general, we should err on the side of caution. Welcome families into church as you would into your home: with a kind word, with a hot drink, and with respect for normal personal boundaries.

A Role for Everyone

However, it is important to get kids actively involved in worship. The

key is that this engagement needs to be meaningful, something that is actually important to the service. Classic examples of this engagement are lighting and extinguishing candles, ringing the bell, and (for older children) assisting at the altar, collecting the offering, or bringing forward the bread and wine. We should also remember that pre-teens and teens can be asked whether they would like to be on the regular rotation of scripture readers, intercessions readers, or part of the choir or music team. We assume too quickly that these are strictly “adult roles.” It is often wise for children to do these things accompanied by an adult. Having children and adults working together on worship tasks is ideal, because it avoids putting the children on display, shows the children that they are doing something “grown up” and valuable, and builds intergenerational connections, especially when children (with their parents’ permission) team up for these tasks with adults who are not related to them.

Conclusion

An attitude that welcomes children and families in liturgy is one that understands how people of all life stages can contribute to worship. Kids are a valuable part of the body of Christ, and they contribute to worship by being present, by singing their hearts out, by expressing their interest in the sights and sounds of the house of God, and by taking on important liturgical roles that are developmentally appropriate for their age group. Congregations which encourage these kinds of engagement will show parents that they understand how kids are part of the family of God.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What do you consider to be the ideal way that children and families will engage in worship in your congregation? Why? What would need to change in your form of worship or your congregational culture for that ideal to become a reality?

2. How much noise from children can your congregation tolerate? What reactions do you think that a child or parent would get if a child started making noise? Be honest and realistic. What can you do to increase your congregation's tolerance for child noise? What can you do to support parents to keep their children happy and engaged throughout the service? Similarly, how much do you expect children to stay in their seat/pew? If you gave parents permission to move around the church with their children during the service, how would your congregation react? What can you do to improve that reaction?

- 3.** Think of ways that you have seen children included in worship in the past, whether in your own congregation or somewhere else. How have you seen children included in a way that values them, gives them an important role, and makes them feel that they are at home and that they are part of what is happening? How have you seen children included in a way that singles them out, embarrasses them or their parents, or puts them on display? Discuss the difference between including children for their own sake and including them for the sake of boosting your congregation's self-esteem or entertainment.

4. How much is your congregation willing to adapt its liturgy to include children more actively? If your liturgy is less flexible, how do you support children and families to engage with it? If your congregation is willing to change its liturgy to make it more child-centric, how will you do this in a way that honours children, serves the rest of the congregation as well, avoids embarrassing children by making them the centre of attention, and is consistent enough from week to week for new families to become familiar with it?

CHECKLIST

Check column A if this is something that your congregation has already done—great job!

Check column B if this is something that you would like to commit to working on in the near future.

Check column C if this is something that you will look at another time.

Note: Don't be discouraged if you don't have very many checks in the A column! Every congregation has growing edges and identifying them is a great first step.

	A	B	C
When the congregation is welcomed at the beginning of the service, is it mentioned every few weeks that children are welcome and that they are free to move around the worship space with their parents during the service?			
When the congregation is welcomed, are newcomers told how they can participate, such as by singing along to the hymns, saying the responses in the book, bulletin, or screen, etc.?			

	A	B	C
<p>When a new hymn is introduced, is it used several times over a short period so that people can become familiar with it? <i>(All people, but families in particular, will feel more comfortable joining in if others are confident with the tune.)</i></p>			
<p>When the congregation is welcomed, are they occasionally encouraged to sing enthusiastically? Are parents encouraged to help their children to sing along?</p>			
<p>Are children included in lighting candles before the service?</p>			
<p>Are children included in ringing the bell before the service?</p>			
<p>Are older children offered opportunities for other active roles in the service, such as readers of scriptures or intercessions, serving at the altar, or collecting the offering?</p>			
<p>Is the worship space beautiful, and decorated in such a way that children have things to look at? Are there any tactile components (things that they can touch) that they can engage with?</p>			

	A	B	C
Is your liturgy multi-sensory? Does it give children things to look at (e.g., art, vestments, processions, candles), to touch (e.g., books, candles), and to smell (e.g., incense, candles)? Or opportunities to move their bodies?			
If you have a children's talk, do you invite the children to the front in a way that is inviting and clear about what is happening?			
Is the children's talk delivered in a way that honours the children present and offers them genuine engagement in worship?			

NOTES

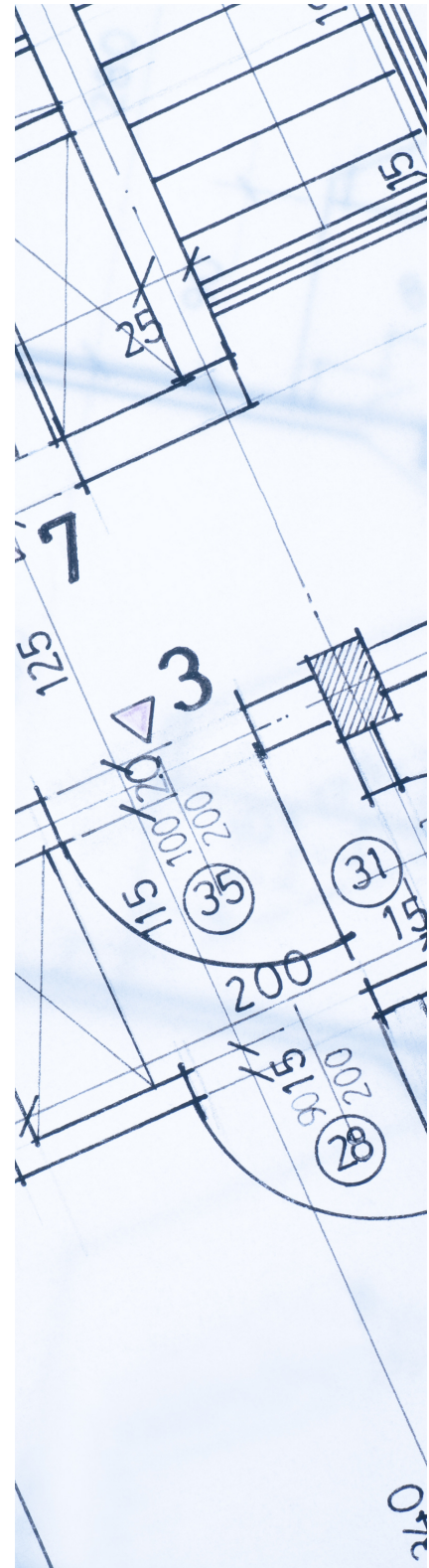
PHYSICAL SPACE AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Big Picture

This section is about follow-through. If we do a great job presenting our church to the outside world so that we have new families stopping in to visit, we have made an implicit promise that “our church is ready to receive you”—so we had better be able to keep that promise!

Becoming ready for families is a cultural shift, as we’ve already discussed, but it’s also a very practical matter. Are our physical spaces, our churches and church halls, family-shaped? Are they set up to be helpful for parents who want to bring their children to church?

Because the physical modifications to church spaces are so particular to the needs of families with children of different ages, the heart of this section is the checklist below: implementing each is a concrete step which your congregation can take to make a family’s visit just a little bit more comfortable.



This communicates care and welcome.

But don't be satisfied with our list alone! Developing a family-friendly space, like so many aspects of welcome, is about putting yourself in someone else's shoes. If you have children, think back to when they were young. In an ideal world, what spaces and supports would you have loved to have access to when you brought kids into a church or other public space? Dream big, because a lot of child-friendly spaces which in previous generations no one would have thought of bringing into the church are now very common. They can also be surprisingly easy to set up, and unobtrusive to other users of the church. You don't need to use only your imagination, either. Lots of businesses and community organizations have taken good steps toward accessibility and child-friendliness, so look around when you're running errands and you may be inspired by simple ideas that the church can also adopt.

The Kids Corner

The physical space modification which is most likely to be a new idea to some parishes is to make a dedicated area for children and families to play and rest in during the service. This is often an enclosed or partly enclosed area at the back of the church, but still within clear hearing distance of the service, and ideally with a clear line of sight so that everyone can listen along and see what is happening. It should be a "soft space" with comfortable chairs and a soft floor on which toddlers can crawl comfortably, and a few cushions for sitting on or taking back to the pews. It should have a collection of quiet toys and activities aimed at different ages and interests of children.

Such a space will meet different needs for different ages of families. For infants and nursing or bottle-feeding parents, feeding will often

be more comfortable in a space which is slightly quieter and more private. (The congregation should also be supportive of those who prefer to breastfeed their infant in the pew, so having a kid's corner is about giving them another option.) For toddlers and children, having a kid's corner can be about creating a space for them to do the moving, exploring, and playing that they were made to do, rather than being stuck to their pews in a way that is beyond their developmental stage. It is also about giving parents another space to travel to when their kids are getting fidgety. Kids often just can't sit still, so it can be helpful to give them "somewhere to go" that still allows everyone to feel connected to the worship service which is taking place in the same room. The kids' corner can also be a place to have a snack.

Setting up a kid's corner is not as daunting as it might sound. Almost every congregation will have members who are willing to donate or loan the necessary supplies. It can even be a fun and nostalgic activity for people whose kids are all grown up, as they reflect back on what their kids were like when they were small and what would have made them feel comfortable and at home.

Going Room-by-Room

We can think about modifications to our space by working room-by-room, imagining how a child or family might interact with each space. It starts with entering the building: how, for example, would a family pushing a stroller get in? Is there a ramp? Is the doorway wide enough to get through? And when they do get in, are there more stairs between them and the worship space? How about the bathroom: would a child be able to reach the sink? Is there a change table? Perhaps after the service you gather for refreshments in the church hall: is that space accessible? And what about its washroom? As you work through this section, you are encouraged to physically

walk around your church and hall, and ask, “How would a child or a parent with a child interact with this space? Is there anything we can do for them in this room?”

Keep Things Practical, but Dream Big

Physical modifications to a church building, especially those which constitute a real renovation, can be a difficult ask, especially when they are expensive. You will only be able to make changes that are realistic, and sometimes the budget just isn't there—but you should still do what you can. You might be surprised how much you can accomplish with a very small budget, on the basis of donations, loans, second-hand purchases, and volunteer labour. There are also grants available for more significant accessibility modifications, which you could find out about by asking around to other churches and the diocesan office. So don't despair! If you think that a change to your space is important for welcoming families, stick with it, get creative, and more often than not some way to make it happen will present itself.

Conclusion

If we want to promise that our church space is welcoming to families, we should make sure that that is true. There are many simple things that we can do to make our churches more “family shaped,” and it will communicate that we mean what we say, and we are ready to support families who make our church their home.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. If you have had children or been close to a family with children, think back to your experiences of kids of different ages. What aspects of public spaces made out-trips with the kids difficult, and what aspects made it easier for you? What can the church learn from your experiences?

2. Do the walk-through of the church described in the prose section above. What did you realize the church should be working on in each room?

CHECKLIST

Check column A if this is something that your congregation has already done—great job!

Check column B if this is something that you would like to commit to working on in the near future.

Check column C if this is something that you will look at another time.

Note: Don't be discouraged if you don't have very many checks in the A column! Every congregation has growing edges and identifying them is a great first step.

	A	B	C
Washrooms:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there safe change tables in all washrooms (including male washrooms)? Do they have baby wipes? Bonus points: do they have a few diapers in different sizes? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there a safe step stool that small children can use to access the sink? 			

	A	B	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it clearly posted how to find the washroom? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you don't have a washroom, has that been made clear on your website or other promotional material? 			
Kids' Corner:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have one? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it a "soft space" where children can sit more comfortably or play on the floor? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does it have a variety of quiet toys for different ages and interests? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does it have a place for a parent to sit? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has it been communicated that parents are welcome to move between that area and the pews during the service? 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does it have a child-height table or surface at which a child could eat a snack? Do you have simple child-appropriate snacks on hand that parents can access (e.g., fruit, crackers)? 			

	A	B	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you have safety covers on the electrical outlets in this area? 			
Are your pews comfortable? If not, is it possible to give parents access to cushions?			
Do you offer packets of activities (e.g., colouring) that children can do in the pews?			
<p>Can a stroller get through your entrances? Do you have a ramp?</p> <p><i>If not, this should be communicated on your website/promotional materials.</i></p>			

NOTES

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

If you've made it this far into this resource, chances are you've done some significant work in reflecting on what is and what could be within your church community - well done!

By now it's likely clear to you that this work is not a simple one-and-done process, but rather something that will need ongoing care and attention as time passes and your community changes. Remember that you can rely on members of your church community, and to connect to other churches who are doing this work for encouragement and support as you continue to do the work of intentionally welcoming families into your church community.

Holy God,

Be with all those who are seeking to more fully welcome families into their midst. Strengthen and encourage them as they help their community become a more full and true reflection of the Body of Christ.

*In the name of the one who is our strength and our hope,
Amen*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

As you do this work in your community, there are a number of additional resources that may be beneficial to you. While this is not a comprehensive list, here are a few suggestions:

Breastfeeding Friendly Church Toolkit and Checklist

Available at www.nspeidiocese.ca/human-resource-policies

These resources, developed by another task Group of the Youth and Family Ministry Vision Strategy and Support Team provides practical information and suggestions to insure that your church is breastfeeding friendly. Much of the content is from a human resources lens, so may take a little bit of creativity in thinking of how to make things relevant for families in your congregation rather than employees, but the content is all specific to a church context and so is very relevant.

Lifelong Faith Training

At www.lifelongfaithtraining.com and www.lifelongfaith.com/family.html

This website is full of free training resources to help equip churches with the skills and information needed to offer meaningful intergenerational opportunities for faith formation.

Hospitality Audit: Tools of the Trade

At www.saltproject.org/hospitality-audit-tools-of-the-trade/hospitality-audit-for-congregations

This is a broader audit that looks at the big picture of hospitality in a congregation. It's included on this list, as it was a helpful resource for the team that put together this audit and reflection guide and may be helpful to others as well.

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