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# Foreword

As a practitioner and parent, it is my belief that children have a place in church and should be nurtured from birth, rather than just being entertained until they are older and therefore able to ‘understand’. It is important that they are encouraged to be members of the church community, enabled to worship with their family and friends and helped to feel that they are part of something bigger. Children should not only be recognized as learners but should also be valued for their ability to teach others. We must therefore ensure that they can explore the stories of the Bible for themselves in a way that is relevant and gives them the opportunity to share their thoughts, beliefs and opinions. It’s not a case of simply telling children stories; we must also listen to what they say.

It is refreshing to hear Alison promote and enthuse about the virtues of play and its place within worship. All too often, the emphasis for young children is on craft—and play, which is a big part of children’s lives, is overlooked. Children learn so much through play; it

engages children of all ages and abilities, giving them the opportunity to explore the Bible for themselves in a way that is safe.

Work with young children and their families is particularly under-resourced and is an area of ministry that people find difficult to engage with, so it is fantastic to have such an easy-to-use resource to help groups with some ready-made outlines for sessions. The general information about where, when, why and how is an invaluable tool to help groups to get started and think about what they do. It is also really useful for established groups who want to review or change what they are doing.

Alison’s knowledge and experience have been indispensable in producing this resource that values children, their knowledge, their gifts and their talents.

*Ellie Wilson*

*Under 5s Children’s Adviser, Diocese of Wakefield*

# Thinking about worship

## Why do we worship?

Gathering together to worship God has been an important part of Christian discipleship and witness since the earliest days of the Church. Corporate worship—gathering together for worship—is important for our spiritual growth. It reflects much of what we hold to be important as the body of Christ, and it shapes us as we continue to grow in discipleship and in ministry and mission within our own communities and the wider world. In corporate worship we praise God (hymns, prayers and psalms), we hear his story and reflect on its message for us today (readings and sermon), we confess our shortcomings and receive pardon so that we can make a fresh start (confession and absolution), we share with God our concerns for the world (prayers of intercession), we proclaim together the essentials of what we believe (the statement of faith or creed) and, at the end, we are sent out, strengthened to live out our calling beyond the church doors in the coming week (the blessing and dismissal). If the service is Holy Communion, we share in the great prayer of thanksgiving and receive the bread and wine.

Corporate worship, however, has often been seen very much as an adult domain and not appropriate for children generally, much less very young children. We might try to keep young children amused and occupied in worship, but it is as if that is the most we can expect until they are old enough really to understand and participate in it themselves.

## Too young to worship?

Many churches consciously try to develop ways of encouraging young children to feel comfortable and accepted when they come to church, and that is important. But this book is about doing more than that; this book is about helping young children to worship. Some people will be very sceptical about this. After all, young children cannot be still for very long, young children cannot read, young children do not

‘understand’ about God, young children cannot... the list could go on! Although these factors might seem to be a crucial part of our corporate worship, they are by no means essential. Are young children such ‘empty vessels’ in the worship stakes?

## A prime time to engage in corporate worship!

It is easy to assume that participation in worship calls for a fairly sophisticated understanding of language, both spoken and written, but worship is more than words. In corporate worship there *are* words, both said and sung, but there can also be movement, drama, silence, actions, symbols and ritual, all of which can resonate with young children. Indeed, far from being ‘empty vessels’, young children have many of the basic ingredients necessary for worship.

- ✦ Young children are spiritual beings. They are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), ‘knitted together’ by God in their mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13, NIV). In fact, if spirituality is an innate and universal dimension of what it means to be human, then spirituality will not just be *present* in young children, but may even be at its most intense in early childhood before it has been overlaid with other ideas and experiences.
- ✦ Many young children, even those who have not experienced a religious environment, have a sense of God before they are three years old.
- ✦ Young children ‘make sense’ of experiences intuitively through their senses and through their spirits before they can articulate their understanding and feelings in language. They know intuitively much more than they can express in words.
- ✦ Children are profoundly open to moments of awe and wonder.
- ✦ They are naturally spontaneous and are not inhibited about displaying expressions of joy, enthusiasm, excitement, sadness, care and concern.
- ✦ They appreciate and want to join in with familiar patterns, rhythms and rituals.
- ✦ They have an effective memory for actions: they will copy, join in with and want to repeat them.
- ✦ They love stories.

- ✦ They love drama and play.
- ✦ Young children know what it is to be in relationship: they are born into a relational situation, and a sense of being in relationship both with God and with other people is an essential part of corporate worship.
- ✦ They appreciate symbol (they use symbols in their play all the time), as long as one of the parts of the symbolic representation is familiar to them.
- ✦ They have a natural desire to participate.
- ✦ They love to celebrate.
- ✦ They can be completely absorbed in the things that engage them.

In addition, young children are naturally curious, they are keen to make sense of the world around them, and they are open and eager to learn new language. Rather than thinking that children need to acquire certain skills or reach a certain level of maturity or understanding before they can participate in corporate worship, we should consider these early years as a prime time for encouraging them in corporate worship by harnessing the capacities that are already present. The early years are widely recognized as crucially important for the development of all kinds of human capacities and abilities, so why not develop their spiritual capacities through corporate worship?

# Introducing Praise and Play

Imagine the scene... While some babies sit on adults' knees, five or six older pre-school children search the back of the church for various hidden items. Once the objects are found, the children come to the front, some walking slowly, holding their item very carefully, others running up the aisle with great eagerness. They all place their items on the special table at the front. The table doesn't always end up looking tidy or artistically arranged, but it is more important for the children to feel that this is their special space. Then, everyone watches and listens expectantly as the candle is lit and the same words—repeated each week—are spoken: 'We light this candle to help us remember that we have come to spend a special time with God and a special time with each other.'

So begins a *Praise and Play* service—a regular midweek service for pre-school children and their carers. In this group there can be two-week-old babies, toddlers, mums, dads, grandparents, child minders and even friends who are just visiting for the day, but all have come 'to spend a special time with God and a special time with each other'.

A number of churches have a regular midweek service for pre-school children and their carers, and many find that such a service is a really positive way of offering something very important to young families. It provides:

- ✦ A safe, non-threatening opportunity for people to bring their babies and toddlers to church, especially those for whom church is a new and probably intimidating place.
- ✦ A special time for children and their carers to share together.
- ✦ A means of helping and encouraging parents to begin to fulfil the promises they made for their child if he or she was baptized as an infant.
- ✦ A means of helping and encouraging carers to be faith nurturers for their children by giving them ideas and tools for bringing elements of the Christian faith into their homes. How often has a parent said later, 'We've been singing that song all week'!

All these factors are important in the *Praise and Play* service, but such midweek provision for young children is rarely regarded as 'proper' worship. However, there is a conscious intention to develop *Praise and Play* as authentic corporate worship; its shape mirrors the fourfold pattern of worship that is widely used within the Christian community (gathering, word, response, conclusion/sending), but at the same time it recognizes the gifts and the needs that young children bring to worship. Furthermore, although *Praise and Play* may initially be intended to minister to the spiritual needs of young children, experience shows that it also ministers to the spiritual needs of the adults who come, many of whom may be new to corporate worship themselves.

## Getting started

### Where should it happen?

*Praise and Play* should take place preferably in the church, especially if that is where most of your church's corporate worship happens. Some people may be aghast at the thought of a service for pre-school children happening in church, but it is a wonderful opportunity to reassure young families that the church and worship really are for them as well. Parents are often intimidated by the church building. 'Coming to church' might be a completely new experience for them, or they might have fearful memories of what church was like when they were children, so the thought of bringing their young children arouses still more anxiety.

Think about a situation that you have gone into as a 'new' person. How did you feel? What was strange about it? If it was a positive experience, how were you helped to feel at ease? If it wasn't positive, what would have helped you? Now relate that experience to new parents and carers coming to your church.

Try to create a warm and positive environment within the church. Use a specific section of the church, such as a side chapel, or move furniture to mark off a special area (for example, rearrange chairs to form a semicircle around the altar or Communion table, or at the foot of the chancel steps). Young children feel reassured by the security of a defined space. Make sure the carpet is clean. You could also put down cushions or kneelers for children (and maybe some adults) to sit on. Arrange for the heating to be turned on in good time.

### When should it happen?

You need to allow at least an hour for *Praise and Play*: the worship lasts for 20–25 minutes, and then you need time for activities and refreshments, free play and a chat. Do some neighbourhood research and avoid times when other events are happening in your locality for pre-school children. In setting the time, take account of the fact that carers may need to take older siblings to and from school.

Be wary of tacking *Praise and Play* on to an existing parent and toddler group. Even though some parent and toddler groups meet on church premises, they may have, at best, a very loose connection with the church. Adding on *Praise and Play* without the substantial agreement of those who already go to the group can generate an attitude of suspicion and resentment. However, existing parent and toddler groups and other pre-school provision can be good places to advertise *Praise and Play*.

### How often should it happen?

Frequency depends on the availability of people to lead the worship and be involved in the organization. In some churches, *Praise and Play* happens weekly; this helps to build a greater sense of community and encourages people to form a 'habit' of regular worship, but it does require a team of people able to commit themselves to weekly attendance. Some churches organize *Praise and Play* services fortnightly or monthly, and some just at special festival times.

## Resourcing Praise and Play

Your most important resource will be the adults who, in different ways, are involved in organizing, preparing for and leading the service. Try to build a team of leaders so that the various roles can be shared and responsibility does not fall on just one or two.

You will need people to lead the service. Your minister may like to be involved, but lay people could also lead. It is very helpful if the minister can be involved at least on some occasions, so that she or he can meet the group and they can meet her or him. You will also need other adults who are willing to 'support'—for example, those who will welcome people at the door, participate in the service and model what happens, prepare and set up the activities, or prepare and serve refreshments. Be cautious about involving adults whose children will be present in the service, as this can be difficult for both the adults and the children, and it may diminish the sense of a special time for the adult to share with their child.

In terms of equipment and materials, you do not need much to start with, but you should think about obtaining the following:

- ✦ A CD player and CDs (especially if you have no pianist or guitarist).
- ✦ Sturdy percussion instruments (such as the ones sold by The Early Learning Centre).
- ✦ Items for the focus table (see page 14 for more details).
- ✦ Basic craft materials (see page 19).
- ✦ Storytelling materials: if you are going to use the stories in this book, you will also need to gather together the necessary materials (see page 20).

## Organizing Praise and Play

Because young children respond well to structure and routine, it is best to develop a pattern that you will follow each time. Here is one suggested pattern, but you may want to develop your own in ways that reflect something of the worship style of your own church.

- ✦ A time of gathering, which could include:
  - Building up a 'focus table'
  - A welcome song
  - Actions or rituals to help people move into a mood of worship
  - A gathering prayer
  - A song of praise

✦ The ministry of the word, which could include:

- An activity to introduce the story
- Telling the story
- Finding the story in the Bible

✦ The response, which could include:

- A conversation about the story
- A song of praise or a song that relates to the story
- A prayer arising out of the story
- A craft activity

✦ The conclusion, which both brings the time of worship to a close and encourages people to look forward to going out. You might include:

- A song
- A blessing prayer
- Actions or rituals to mark the ending of the worship

You may also want to include a time of sharing important items of news and celebrating birthdays or other significant events. After the structured time of worship, there can be a time for less structured activities and free play with toys, with drinks and a snack.

# Jesus is born

Session

1

**Bible reference: Luke 2:1–20**

This must be the best-known story of Jesus for young children. Many ‘early years’ groups, even those that are not connected with a church, will, through story and drama, rhyme and music, tell the story of Jesus’ birth: the long journey to Bethlehem with Mary riding a donkey, the frustrating attempts to find a room in the overcrowded hotels, the offer of a stable with animals lying peacefully around on sweet-smelling hay, and the birth of the baby Jesus who rests in the manger while Mary sits serenely nearby and Joseph stands protectively over them both. But look again at the passage in Luke’s Gospel, and you will see that imaginative embellishments have become embedded into the core of the story. So what has been added in?

## Let’s explore further...

In Luke’s account there is no mention of a donkey—although it is not unreasonable to imagine Mary riding on a donkey, as the journey between Nazareth and Bethlehem was about 110km (70 miles) and donkeys were the most common form of transport. Nor is there any specific mention of a ‘stable’, and that tradition may have emerged by deduction from the reference to Jesus being placed in an animal’s feeding trough (or manger). It’s also quite likely that the word translated as ‘inn’ does not correspond to ‘hotel’ as we know it. It is possible that part of Joseph’s extended family already lived in Bethlehem, and Luke may have been describing the kind of house that had two floors, in which the ground floor was usually kept for animals while people lived and slept upstairs. There may even have been a guest area. Perhaps Mary and Joseph had to stay on the ground floor, because the guest area upstairs was already too crowded. Although this floor would have had the trappings associated with animals (hence the manger), there is no suggestion that animals were actually present.

It is tempting to overlook the significance in the story of the strips of cloth and the manger (v. 12). Our carefully crafted nativity scenes depict the stable as an isolated and ‘obvious’ building for the shepherds to find, but, if Mary and Joseph were staying in a house, it would have been one among many and there may have been other newborn babies in Bethlehem that night. The shepherds could have been in for a long search. The strips of cloth and the manger were signs given by the angel so that the shepherds would know that *this* was the baby they were looking for.

The shepherds are significant in Luke’s account for a number of reasons. They represent society’s poor and marginalized, who, along with the lame, the blind and the oppressed, feature so strongly in Luke’s Gospel as rightfully belonging to the kingdom of God. But more than this, there had been a long tradition of ‘shepherding’ as an image for leadership of the Jewish people. The prophet Ezekiel had criticized the leaders of his day and prophesied that, one day, God would come as a very different kind of shepherd (Ezekiel 34). Here, then, we see the shepherds from the fields paying homage to the baby who would grow up to be *the* Shepherd.

The part of Luke’s passage that is often omitted in retellings for children is the response of the shepherds after they had found the baby. They didn’t keep this discovery to themselves but made known not just the existence of the baby but ‘what the angel had said about him’ (v. 17), and they returned to their sheep ‘glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen’ (v. 20, NRSV).

So can it be said that the story of Jesus’ birth is a story for young children? Yes, of course, but the challenge is to generate among the children, and the adults with them, something of the wonder that the shepherds first experienced, so that they too want to respond by ‘praising and glorifying God’. Luke tells us an amazing story! The birth of any baby is special, but he is not telling us of the birth of any baby, but the birth of the one who is ‘a Saviour... Christ the Lord’ (v. 11).

He is telling of the incarnation: in this baby, born of a single mother in a place usually kept for animals, whose only visitors on that first night were some lowly shepherds—in this baby God became human. Does this make your heart leap? Does it make you say ‘Wow’? The danger is that we can romanticize and embellish the story so much that the true focus of it is lost.



## The story

See notes on storytelling materials on page 20.

### You will need:

- \* The story basket
- \* The sand-coloured story cloth
- \* Fabric for the road
- \* Green fabric for the fields
- \* Wooden bricks in a basket, enough to make the base of a house
- \* A manger and straw
- \* Figures: Mary, Joseph, baby, four angels, three shepherds, some sheep (Group the figures in smaller baskets)
- \* A strip of white cloth

### Setting up the story

*(Bring out the story basket and create an air of mystery as you open it.)* I wonder who or what our story is going to be about today?

I wonder where our story will be? *(Lay out the sand-coloured story cloth.)*

How might you get from there *(point to the right-hand edge of the story cloth)* to there *(move your hand across to the other side of the story cloth)*, or from there to there? *(Reverse movement. Talk about the possibilities.)*

We need a road! *(Bring out the strip of fabric for the road, and lay it across the story cloth.)*

Maybe it's not all sand and road. I've got something else here. *(Hold out the green fabric before laying it down on the far left of the cloth.)* What might this be?

Do you think anything or anyone stays here? Let's see if there's anything else in the story basket. Yes, there are some sheep. *(Bring out the sheep and place them on the grass.)*

Will the sheep be all right by themselves or do they need someone to look after them? *(Allow time for the children to make their own suggestions and then look in the story basket.)*

Let's see, yes—some people to look after the sheep. We call them shepherds. *(Place three shepherds with the sheep.)*

There's something else—a basket of bricks. *(Bring out the basket of bricks and start to play with them.)* What might these be in the story? *(Gradually build a base for the house to the left of the middle of the story cloth, next to and on your side of the road.)*

It could be a house, but there's something to go in this place. *(Bring out the manger.)* It's got straw in it... it's a feeding box for animals—sometimes it's called a manger—so maybe some animals sometimes live here. I wonder if people could live here, too? I wonder what it would be like to stay in here?

*(Sit back and view the story cloth.)*

So... a road, a kind of house with a manger in it, some fields with some sheep and some shepherds. *(Touch or point to the different parts as you remind children of the features.)* I think we've got everything we need to start. Are you ready for our story?

### Telling the story

The people living in this place *(move hand across the story cloth)* were very unhappy, but God had promised them that—when the time was right—he would send a special person to rescue them, to make them happy and safe and more like how God wanted them to be. But who would this special person be? *(Pause before continuing the story.)*

Once there was a woman called Mary. *(Hold Mary in the palm of your hand.)* She was having a baby. An angel had told Mary that the baby she was carrying was very special; her baby was the Son of God.

Mary lived in a house in Nazareth. *(Place Mary by the road at the far right-hand side.)* She was engaged to a man called Joseph. *(Take out Joseph and hold him in the palm of your hand.)* Joseph took good care of Mary. *(Place Joseph next to Mary.)*

One day, Mary and Joseph had to make a long

journey to a town called Bethlehem... *(move your hand over the left part of the story cloth, then begin to move the figures along the road)* the town where the great king David had once lived.

It was a long way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and it was a hard journey, especially for Mary because she was having the baby.

After many days travelling, they got to Bethlehem. *(Rest the figures on the road, before the stable.)* Lots and lots of people were there, all needing a place to stay. And do you know where Mary and Joseph had to stay? They had to stay in a place where animals sometimes lived. *(Move the figures into the 'stable'.)*

While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn son *(place the baby Jesus in your hands)*, she wrapped him in strips of cloth *(wrap strip of white cloth around the baby)* and she put him in an animals' feeding box. *(Bring out the baby and lay him in the feeding box.)* And there the baby lay.

It was night time and, out on the hills, the shepherds were looking after their sheep. *(Indicate the shepherds and sheep by circling your left hand over that part of the story cloth.)* Now we would think that looking after sheep was a very important job but, in this place, people didn't think shepherds were very important at all.

When these very ordinary shepherds looked up, standing before them was an angel from God... *(place angel figure near the shepherds)* and there was bright light shining all around. The shepherds were really frightened.

But the angel said, 'Don't be frightened. I am bringing you good news that is going to bring great joy to everyone. Today God's special person has been born in Bethlehem. You will find him as a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in an animal's feeding box.'

Suddenly, there were lots of angels *(place other three angels around the first angel)*, all praising God and saying, 'Praise God in heaven!'

Then the angels went away. *(Take the angels away.)* The shepherds raced to find God's special person, the baby whom the angel had told them about. *(Move the shepherds along the road towards the 'stable'.)* They found the baby, just as the angel had said, wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in the

animals' feeding box... *(arrange the shepherds around the manger)* with Mary and Joseph close by.

When they left, the shepherds told other people about the baby and what the angel had said. *(Scatter the shepherds to different parts of the story cloth.)* Then, as they returned to the fields, they thanked God for all that they had seen and heard. *(Move the shepherds back to the fields.)*

*(Take the baby and hold it in the palm of your hand.)* This is God's special person. He will be like a light from heaven, shining on all who are sad or frightened or want to be better people.

### Talking about the story

- ✦ Talk about which part of the story the children liked best.
- ✦ Was there anything they did not like?
- ✦ Where would they like to be in the story? (If possible, have a basket of spare figures so that they can put themselves in the story.)
- ✦ Who is God's special person?



### Prayer

Christmas is a happy time for many people, but some people are sad. Ask if anyone knows someone who will be sad this Christmas.

*Dear God, you came to earth in Jesus so that you could be close to people, especially people who are sad. Please be close to everyone who is sad at Christmas time, especially... Amen*

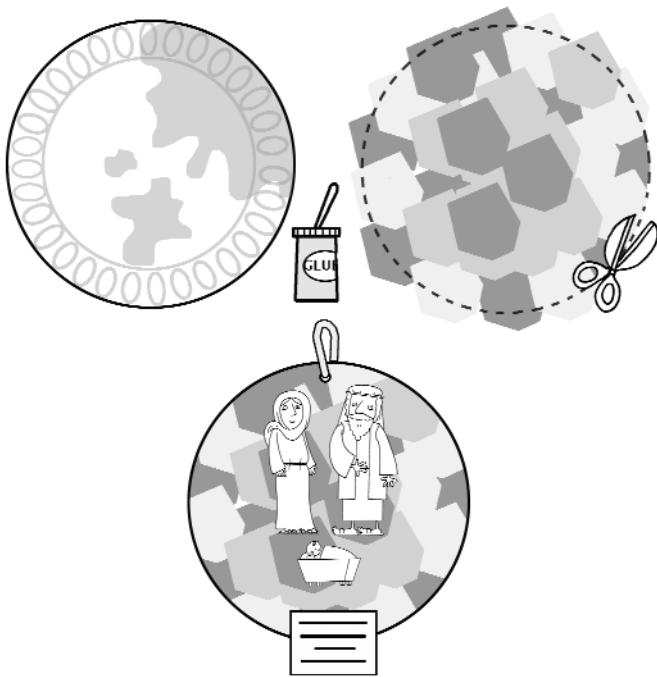
## Individual craft activity

### Nativity plaques

#### For each child you will need:

- \* A paper plate with a hole punched at the top
- \* Strips of orange, yellow and red tissue paper
- \* Simple line drawings of Mary, Joseph and the manger and baby (see template, page 64)
- \* Message label saying: 'The angel said to the shepherds, 'Don't be frightened! God's special person has been born today.' (Luke 2:10, adapted)
- \* A length of wool or ribbon for a hanging thread
- \* Watered-down PVA glue and a glue spreader

Spread glue over the plate and cover completely with the strips of coloured tissue paper. (Adult task: trim around the edge of the plate to remove any over-hanging bits of tissue paper.) When the plate is covered, spread a thin layer of glue over the tissue paper. Place the cut-out line drawings in the middle of the plaque. Attach the message label at the bottom and thread the hanging thread through the hole in the top.



## Group craft activity

### Greetings wreath

Make a greetings wreath to give to a group in the community, such as those living at a local residential home.

#### You will need:

- \* White card
- \* Green sugar paper
- \* A nativity picture
- \* PVA glue
- \* Red finger paint
- \* Red crêpe paper
- \* Card to make a message label

Cut out a large circle of card. The size of the circle will depend on the number of people in your group. Draw a smaller circle in the middle and stick on a nativity picture. You could use an old Christmas card or download a picture from the Internet.

Draw around everyone's hands using green sugar paper and cut out the shapes. Stick them outside the small circle, with the fingers towards the outer edge. Curling the fingers gives added effect. Using red finger paint, invite everyone to add some 'berries'.

Make a big red bow from crêpe paper and stick it at the bottom of the wreath.

Make a message label saying 'A happy Christmas to everyone' and attach it to the middle of the bow.

## Snack time

### Decorate Christmas biscuits

Make a basic biscuit dough using your own recipe or the one below.

#### You will need:

300g self-raising flour; 200g butter or margarine; 200g caster sugar; 1 egg (beaten); icing sugar and a selection of cake decorations; mixing spoon or hand-held mixer; small rolling pins; Christmas pastry cutters; baking parchment or greaseproof paper dusted with flour; baking tray.

Put the flour into a bowl. Rub in the butter or margarine, then stir in the sugar. Mix to a stiff dough with the beaten egg. Knead lightly until smooth.

The dough should be rolled out to about 5mm thickness and then cut out with Christmas cutters, such as stars or angels. Decorate the biscuits with icing and other cake decorations.

Place each biscuit on a square of baking parchment, marked with the child's name, then put the biscuits on a baking tray and bake them. If you have no kitchen facilities, the children could take their biscuits home unbaked, with instructions on how to bake them at home. The biscuits will need to be baked in an oven pre-heated to Gas Mark 3/325°F/170°C for about 18 minutes.

**NB:** Make sure the children wash their hands before the activity. If you have no water connection, have available a plastic washing-up bowl, water warmed in a kettle, some soap and towels. As with any food activity, check whether any child has allergies, and, as the biscuit recipe has egg in it, make sure the children don't eat the raw dough.