



Singing the Faith to Our Children

Hymns and Faith Formation

“Jesus loves me! This I know.” “The B-i-b-le, yes that’s the book for me.” “Jesus love the little children, all the little children of the world.” Are these familiar songs from your childhood? No doubt singing has long been a part of the faith formation process for children. Many hymns that are now standards in the traditional, worship song/hymn repertoire had their beginnings as songs for children’s Sunday School classes. Hymns like “All Things Bright and Beautiful” or “Once in Royal David’s City” were originally written to provide young people with vivid images of the Bible stories they were studying in their Sunday morning curriculums. While music has played an historical role in faith formation, how can children’s music be used to support— or even be the basis of— faith formation curriculum in the 21st Century?

The benefits of reading to our children are well known. A recent Washington Post article highlights this point, “Study after study shows that early reading with children helps them learn to speak, interact, bond with parents and read early themselves, and reading with kids who already know how to read helps them feel close to caretakers, understand the world around them and be empathetic citizens of the world.” Similarly, singing reinforces language and theology for young people. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, the leading accreditation organization for preschools and early childhood education in the U.S., highlights their opinion on the importance of singing to children with a number of blog posts, articles and curriculum connections focused on regular singing to children.

By extension, singing songs of faith to our children is an important part of faith formation. In a chapter on singing in *Practicing Our Faith*, Don Saliers notes: “When life is deeply felt or perceived, music gives shape and voice to the very pattern of our experienced world. ... The tensions, resolutions, moods, convictions, and playfulness of everyday life are translated into the patterns of sound ... the act of singing together of life lived and felt binds heart and mind together.” In other words, music binds the community together and thus singing to our children, surrounding them with the music of our faith, should be an everyday way that we encourage faith development in our young ones.

This practice is more than just developing a children’s choir program. Music can and should be an embedded part of the children’s faith formation curriculum providing all students the opportunity to make music in various forms (i.e. bells, Orff instruments, rhythm sticks, etc. as well as singing) and used to support classes and gatherings outside of the choir time (i.e. Vacation Bible School music, Sunday morning large gathering times, sung prayers before meals, etc.). Putting this into practice requires church leaders, teachers, and musicians to think outside the box about ways to incorporate and utilize music making beyond having children stand up and perform. For example, children might learn only the refrain of a hymn to use as a prayer response in their Sunday School class or use seasonally appropriate shorter songs from the hymnal (or other sources) to reinforce the liturgical year, thematic elements, or connect with the worship of the church. Improvising using Bible verses on Orff instruments can provide students a different way to connect with the scripture moving from simply hearing the scripture to enacting it. In more advanced settings, using the lyrical theology of the hymns as the basis of a curriculum could provide the outline for faith formation based solely on music.

TIPS & TRICKS FOR INCORPORATING MUSIC INTO FAITH FORMATION

1. Trust your voice.
 - a. It is not necessary for music to be an elaborate production to be incorporated into faith formation. No piano or other accompaniment is required. Use what you have and trust your own abilities. Practice and prepare as you would for other lessons.
2. Make the music work for you.
 - a. You needn't sing four stanzas of a hymn for it to be a useful tool in faith formation! Pick music that works for you or adapt it to fit your needs. Look at the list below to find additional resources for selecting music.
3. Use the materials you have!
 - a. Don't have a full set of Orff instruments or chimes? Use what you have. Create a glockenspiel part for the one instrument you have and take turns. Make rhythm sticks from wooden dowels. Use buckets as drums. Invite children to bring instruments they are learning to play.
4. Consult with your music colleagues.
 - a. Develop and foster relationships with your musical colleagues as partners in faith formation, including lay leaders.
 - b. Check out the many resources, workshops, etc. offered by the [Presbyterian Association of Musicians](#) related to children's music.

SELECTED RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN'S MUSIC & FAITH FORMATION

1. [Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal](#)
 - a. A number of hymns and shorter songs included in *Glory to God* are appropriate for use with children. For example: #70 What Does the Lord Require of You? (canon), #585 Gloria a Dios/Glory to God (echo song), #267 Come, Christians, Join to Sing (children sing refrain only), #243 Be Not Afraid (many Taizé refrains work well for children), among many others.
2. [Halle, Halle, Halle: We Sing the World Round](#) (1999) by C. Michael Hawn. Chorister's Guild
 - a. Many easily accessible songs from the global church for children (or adults!)
3. [Come All You People](#) and *There Is One Among Us* Shorter Songs for Worship by John Bell and the Iona Community. GIA Publications.
4. [All Hands In: Drumming the Biblical Narrative](#) by Brian Hehn. Chorister's Guild.

See also "[Singing the Faith to Our Children](#)" article in the June 2018 issue of *Presbyterian Outlook* by Diana and Joshua Taylor.

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