

Ideas for an Intergenerational Easter Vigil

The Great Vigil of Easter has been called the “brightest jewel of Christian liturgy traced to early Christian times” (Book of Common Worship). It consists of four related services:

<i>Service of Light</i>	<i>Giving thanks for the light of Christ, shining in darkness</i>
<i>Service of Readings</i>	<i>Hearing the story of God’s saving acts through history</i>
<i>Service of Baptism</i>	<i>Remembering our baptism into the body of Jesus Christ</i>
<i>Service of Eucharist</i>	<i>Celebrating a feast of thanksgiving with our risen Lord</i>

Here are some practical guidelines and ideas for planning an intergenerational Easter Vigil in your congregation. See the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* (WJKP, 1993) for more information about the service and to supplement these notes with the full order of worship.

Before the Service

- Start planning early. The beginning of the school year in the fall is a good time to begin. Preparing for the Easter Vigil can be a year-long, intergenerational process that shapes faith, teaches tradition, and forms community for young and old.
- Schedule the service for a time on the Saturday before Easter that will be appropriate for families and young children. Don’t worry about waiting until sundown to begin. Make every effort to keep the service to a reasonable length—one hour should be enough. Keep things simple, especially the first time you celebrate the Easter Vigil.
- Work with artists and children in the congregation to design and create banners that can be used for each of the readings or parts of the service. See appendix one for ideas.
- Recruit musicians, dancers, actors, and others in the congregation to help with various parts of the service; or make an open invitation, asking what gifts people would like to share and find appropriate ways to involve them in the service.
- In the days leading up to the service, talk to children (and others) about what to expect at the Easter Vigil so they will be prepared to participate fully, consciously, and actively.
- Hold a “dress rehearsal” on the morning of the service so leaders can go through the order of worship and anticipate any last minute needs.

Service of Light

- Gather around a fire outside the church. Enlist children to pass around bulletins (if needed) and/or candles to the worshippers.
- Sing “This Little Light of Mine” or “We Are Marching in the Light of God” as you process from the place of the fire into the sanctuary. See appendix two for more musical ideas.
- Use a child-friendly Thanksgiving for Light. See appendix three.

Service of Readings

- Keep the Service of Readings shorter by using only three of the nine Old Testament passages provided (but always include some version of Exodus 14–15). You can focus on different readings over the course of several years to tell more of the story.
- Abbreviate or adapt the readings as needed, and find translations of the Bible that speak in language accessible to younger people (e.g., the Common English Bible).

- Find creative ways to present the Scripture readings; see appendix four.
- Make creative use of your church property, or a nearby playground or park, by moving to different spaces for some of the readings (e.g. Genesis 1–2 outdoors, Exodus 14–15 by a creek or stream, Isaiah 55 at a water fountain, Proverbs 8 on the street, Ezekiel 37 in a cemetery).
- When planning this part of the service, try to find the appropriate balance between *too much* movement for older adults and *just enough* to keep active children busy; be sure to take into account mobility concerns so all can participate.
- Use lively contemporary songs, global refrains, or spirituals where the liturgy suggests psalms as responses to the readings. If possible, use music that can be easily taught by rote, and doesn't require hymnals or songbooks. See appendix two for a few suggestions.
- In this service the Scripture readings themselves can serve as proclamation of the Word; a sermon is not needed. If a sermon is included it should be very brief and in language that children will understand.

Service of Baptism

- Use a child-friendly Thanksgiving Over the Water. See appendix five.
- Enlist children to help with the reaffirmation of Baptism—going throughout the congregation to splash people with wet branches, saying “Remember your baptism!” (Youth or adults may accompany them with bowls of water to replenish the branches.)

Service of Eucharist

- Use a child-friendly Great Thanksgiving. See appendix six.
- Serve communion by intinction (coming forward to dip bread in the cup), which is a more active way for children to take part in the sacrament. You can have one server break pieces of bread and give them to each person. (This avoids having everyone pulling at the bread, and prevents people from taking such small pieces that they dip their fingers in the cup.)
- Provide large, appetizing pieces of bread, so everyone will be able to “taste and see the goodness of God” (Ps. 34:8).
- Sing joyful songs during communion. This is a celebration of Jesus rising from the dead!

After the Service

- Have a party after the service with food and drink that people of all ages will enjoy.
- Talk to children about what they saw, heard, felt, and experienced. Ask them what questions they have about the service or the stories of Scripture.
- Start planning for next year!

Appendix One: Ideas for Banners

There are at least three possibilities for banners for the Easter Vigil. These are listed in order from the simplest to most elaborate.

- (1) Make two banners to represent the pillar of fire and pillar of cloud by which God guided the people of Israel through the wilderness. These can be as simple as attaching long ribbons (red, orange, and yellow for fire; gray, silver, and white for cloud) to a shorter cross-bar atop a tall pole. These banners can be carried throughout the service, especially when/if the congregation processes from place to place (e.g. from the fire to the sanctuary, or to different “stations” for readings).
- (2) Make four banners, one for each “movement” or service in the Easter Vigil: light, readings, water, and meal. Design these with colors and symbols that represent the four parts of the liturgy: fire and light (red, orange, yellow) in darkness; a scroll, book, words, or letters (such as Alpha and Omega) for readings; water (blue, silver, white) for baptism (another baptismal symbol is the seashell); and the bread and cup, wheat and grapes for the Lord’s Supper. These banners may also be carried in procession throughout the service, and may be placed in stands in appropriate locations throughout the worship space: light near the paschal candle; readings near the pulpit or lectern; water near the font; meal near the table.
- (3) Make one banner for each of the Scripture readings in the service (see in appendix two or four), using prominent images, symbols, or themes from the readings themselves. These banners can be carried to the pulpit or lectern (or another location from which the Scripture is read) and displayed prominently during the corresponding reading, then returned to a more neutral location in the worship space. They may also be carried in procession throughout the service.

Of course, you may also decide to do some kind of combination (or all or none) of the above suggestions. Rely on the gifts and ideas of your community!

Appendix Two: Music Suggestions

Service of Light

This Little Light of Mine
We Are Marching in the Light of God (Siyahamba)
I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light

Service of Readings

Gen. 1:1–2:4a Ps. 136:1-9, 23-26

After each day of the creation story:
All Things Bright and Beautiful (refrain only)
For the Beauty of the Earth (refrain only)

Gen. 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13 Ps. 46
We Shall Not Be Moved (refrain only)

Gen. 22:1-18 Ps. 16
Bless the Lord, My Soul (Taizé)

Ex. 14:10-31; 15:20-21 Ex. 15:1b-13, 17-18
Wade in the Water

Isa. 55:1-11 Isa. 12:2-6
Surely It Is God Who Saves Me

Prov. 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6 Ps. 19
Seek Ye First

Ezek. 36:24-28 Ps. 42 and 43
Like the Deer

Ezek. 37:1-14 Ps. 143
Dem Bones

Zeph. 3:14-20 Ps. 98
Here I Am, Lord (a soloist or choir sings the verses; all sing the refrain)
Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee

Rom. 6:3-11 Ps. 114
Freedom Is Coming

Matt. 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, or Luke 24:1-12
Halle, Halle, Hallelujah

Service of Baptism

Take Me to the Water

Service of Eucharist

Hallelujah! We Sing Your Praises

Appendix Three: Thanksgiving for Light

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Thank you, God, for the gift of your light —
shining on the first day of creation,
guiding us through the wilderness,
leading us to the land of promise.

You sent Jesus, light of the world,
to be our way of truth and life.

Help us to follow him each day
and rest in him each night
until at last we come
to live with you in endless light.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord
and with the Holy Spirit
we give you honor and glory,
now and always.

Amen.

Appendix Four: Presenting the Readings

These ideas are just to get you started thinking. Come up with your own creative ways to present the readings using the gifts of people in your congregation.

Gen. 1:1–2:4a

Ask children in the congregation to illustrate or dramatize each day of creation. These might be prepared by different Sunday school classes, or by one class over the course of a whole year.

Gen. 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13

Use a children’s Bible to tell the story of Noah and the great flood. Invite children to bring favorite stuffed animals and design a cardboard model of the ark to use in telling the story.

Gen. 22:1-18

This reading—God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac—may not be appropriate for an intergenerational Easter Vigil. Think carefully before including this reading, and if you decide to use it, handle it with great care and pastoral sensitivity.

Ex. 14:10-31; 15:20-21

Using large pieces of blue, watery-looking fabric, choreograph the passage of the people of Israel through the Red Sea. You might recruit youth to be “cloth-wranglers.”

Isa. 55:1-11

Read this from the baptismal font or another source of water—even a water fountain if space allows. Or have several people pour water from pitchers into a large bowl before or during the reading. You might ask children to hand out pieces of fruit during the “come and eat” part.

Prov. 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6

Have someone with a loud voice read this passage on the street outside the church. You might even make “picket signs” with words of wisdom from Scripture for children or other members of the congregation to carry during this part of the service.

Ezek. 36:24-28

In advance, have children write these words on cut-out paper hearts: “I will give you a new heart and a new spirit. You will be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36). Invite children to give them to each person in worship.

Ezek. 37:1-14

Give people in the congregation rattles and other noisemakers to use at appropriate points in the reading—representing the rattling of dry bones and the rush of wind.

Zeph. 3:14-20

This passage describes God singing a love song to the people, calling them home. Ask a member of the choir to chant this, or sing a hymn with similar themes, to the congregation.

Rom. 6:3-11

Ask a young person to read this, standing at the baptismal font.

Matt. 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, or Luke 24:1-12

Invite a storyteller in the congregation to memorize this reading and tell it by heart.

Appendix Five: Thanksgiving Over the Water

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

We thank you, Holy God,
for the gift of water!

On the first day of creation
your Spirit moved across the water
and you spoke the Word
that made the world.

In the days of Noah
you sent a great flood
to wash away bad things
and start over again.

In the time of Moses
you led your people
through the deep sea
and into a new land.

In the Jordan river
when Jesus was baptized by John
you sent him your Spirit
and said, You are my child.
I love you.

Touching the water:

We thank you, Holy God,
for the water of baptism—
giving us life,
washing us clean,
setting us free,
making us your children.

Now pour out your Holy Spirit on us.
Give us life,
wash us clean,
set us free,
and help us to be
the beloved children
you have made us to be
in Jesus Christ our Savior.

We praise you, Holy God,
Three-in-One,
forever and ever. **Amen.**

Appendix Six: Great Thanksgiving

The Lord be with you.

Lift up your hearts.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

And also with you.

We lift them to the Lord.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Thank you, God, for making the world—
the sun and rain, the moon and stars,
mountains and valleys, rivers and lakes,
deserts and oceans, forests and fields,
and all the plants, animals, and people.

Thank you for making us your children.
You know us and call us by name.
You help us to learn and grow.
You find us when we are lost
and you lead us safely back home.

That is why we sing this joyful song:

or, in call and response to the tune “Frere Jacques”:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full
of your glory.**

Holy, holy,
holy Lord,
we can see your glory
in the world.

**Holy, holy
holy Lord,
we can see your glory
in the world.**

**Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes
in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

O how blessed
is the one
you have sent to save us.
Jesus, come!

**O how blessed
is the one
you have sent to save us.
Jesus, come!**

Thank you, God, for Jesus, your holy child.
He taught us how to love each other,
to take care of people who are sick,
to share our food with the hungry,
and to tell good news to all the world.

You sent Jesus to show us the way
so that we could live forever with you.
When we share this meal with Jesus
we remember your great love
and we say thank you, thank you, thank you.

Great is the mystery of faith:

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Pour out your Spirit in this place,
so that Jesus will be with us
when we share this bread and cup.
Make us one family in the church
and use us to do your good work.

Help us to follow you each day
until Jesus makes everything new
and we can gather around one table
with all of your people everywhere.
We pray these things in your holy name.

Amen.