

What's a Pray-Ground?

Pray-Grounds were introduced only a few years ago in response to a number of shifts and changes in today's Protestant church culture, such as

- parents desiring to have their young children in worship with them;
- parents not wishing to leave their child in a church nursery with a “stranger”;
- congregations that do not have enough children to sustain a Sunday School program;
- the understanding that the children can only learn to worship by regularly being in worship;

among other situations unique to each individual congregation.

A Pray-Ground is a designated place in the front of the sanctuary where young children can experience worship through age-appropriate worship materials and tools that will help keep them engaged in what is happening — materials such as children's Bibles and books, coloring/drawing materials, soft toys, Play-Doh and pipe cleaners and other manipulables, items related to the scripture theme such as smooth stones, feathers, shells, etc.

Why a Pray-Ground? (Quotes from church leaders' Facebook posts, used with permission)

- “I like to think of Pray-Grounds as an accommodation, like a wheelchair ramp or a hearing aid, to help children access worship. Pray-Grounds can be a useful tool and I love how they make it clear that children have a place in the sanctuary.”
- “It's important that the kids can see. If the front isn't an option, a clear line of sight is ideal. Very few Pray-Grounds are successful at the back of the sanctuary because the children do not feel a part of worship and tend create their own, more noisy, ‘version of worship’ for themselves. In the front they can also see what is going on and remain more engaged, thus more attentive and respectful.”
- “Pray-Grounds say more loudly than Sunday School programs, “*Children are welcome here.*”
- “Overall, our Pray-Ground is a blessing, and the positive comments come from the people I least expect to hear them from.”
- “The Pray-Ground is not just for children; it's for all of us.”

How Children Learn

- Young children learn by observing the adults around them.
- Children acquire the “language” of worship by listening to and observing the words that the adults around them say, much like how they learn their native tongue.
- Very young children's brains are primed for language as they listen to patterns that their brains will recognize later when they begin speaking words.
- Children are able to process what they hear more effectively when they have something to do with their hands.
- Children love rituals and repetition.



Some Pray-Ground Cautions

- Take it slow. Communicate the concept well and through proper leadership channels before implementing. Try it for 6 weeks or so, then evaluate.
- Know your culture. What aspects of your congregation's culture need to be taken into consideration with this model, and how will you adapt (both the Pray-Ground and your culture)?
- Set up ground rules. Create a behavioral covenant for the congregation that includes children, adults, worship leaders, and visitors. What age children are invited? What happens if a child gets too noisy? Where should the parents sit? etc.
- Be patient. Both children and adults will need at least a few months before it is clear how and why Pray-Grounds function.

Pray-Ground Resources

Visit the Intergenerational Resources webpage on the Association of United Church Educators website and scroll down to "PrayGrounds."

www.AUCE-UCC.org

*We hope you will try this model of inclusiveness in your service of worship.
Let your community know that kids are important!*