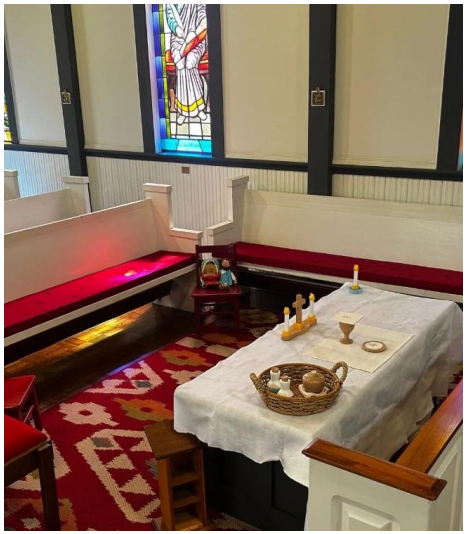
ACCOMMODATING CHILDREN IN INTERGENERATIONAL WORSHIP: PRAYGROUNDS

Praygrounds are areas intentionally designed to welcome children into worship.

They are an accommodation for young children in worship, much like large print bulletins, wheelchair space and hearing aids are for others.



The UCC states: "Praygrounds demonstrate *extravagant welcome* to our youngest members, create a space for play and joy, and help children to know that the church is for them."

Centering children in the life of the church

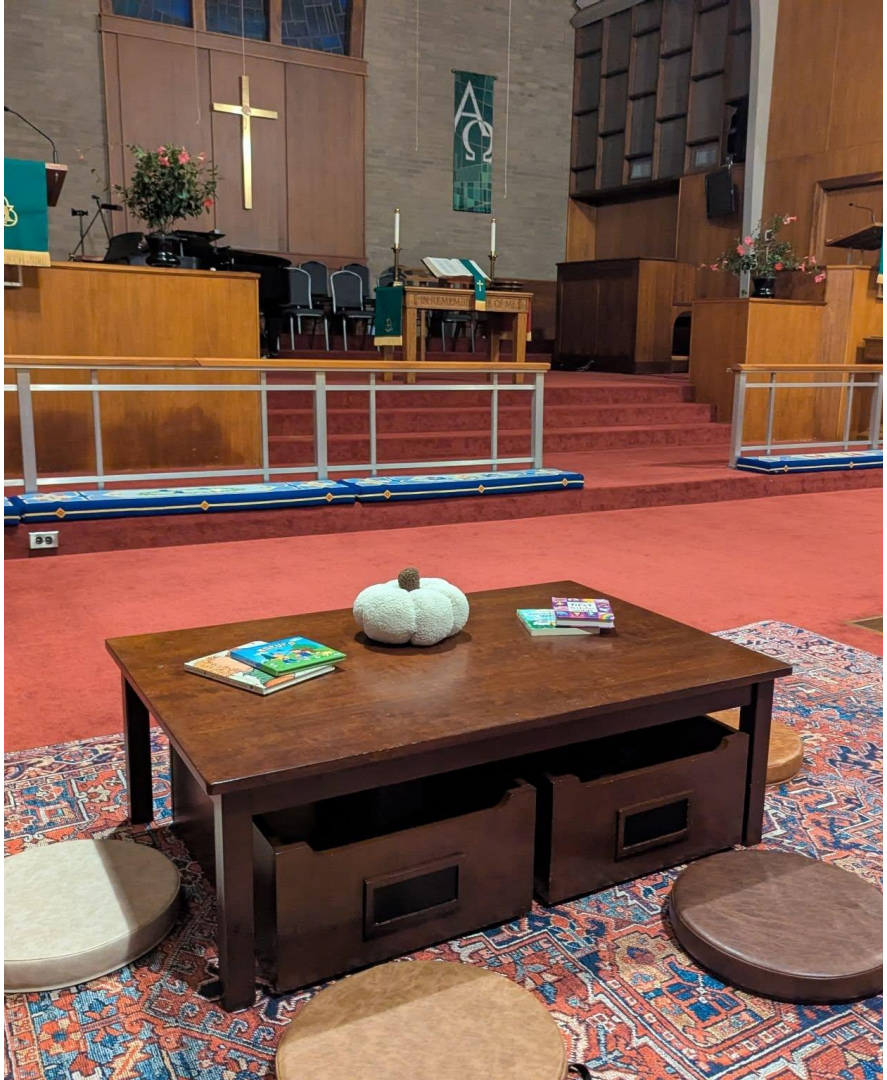
Drawing from the wisdom of congregations who have engaged in this work already, research suggests:

- Offering a Prayground is a statement to the entire congregation that we are making physical and spiritual space for families.

- Praygrounds offer an opportunity for spiritual formation to begin at an early age.

- Children are more attentive and active in the service when they are near the front of the worship area/have clear sight lines.

- When children, who have been separated out of the worshiping community, get to an age to decide for themselves if they want to be part of worship, they often opt out because it hasn't been part of their life up to that point.



Children learn best by observing the adults around them.

✤ Children love rituals and repetition.

✤ Children are able to process what they hear more effectively when they have something to do with their hands.

✤ Children acquire the "language" of worship and their community of faith by listening to and observing the adults around them.

*"We believe there are new and innovative ways that we can shape this resource to more **actively invite children into worship**, and we are working with congregations to discover those possibilities." ~ UCC.org*

Best Practices

These are the basics; the possibilities from there are endless!

A clear view of the service. Many children are not able to see what is going on from the pews or chairs. A low area toward the front of the worship space means that kids can fully see the entire service.
A space that accommodates children's bodies. This could be a short table, small chairs, bean bags, or even a comfy carpet. More importantly, this includes space for children to move – an essential physical need for our youngest members. The area also includes seating nearby for their grownups to engage with them.
Things to occupy children's hands so their minds can be focused. Soft toys and materials can serve as both worship tools and helpful fidgets without making much noise – Plush Jesus, Dove, Bread, and Grapes for pretend play and biblical storytelling, soft instruments and ribbons for musical worship expression

A Prayground is more than a play space.

It's a tangible and visible expression of the church's commitment to children as full participants in worship.

By offering a safe and engaging space within the sanctuary, with clear expectations and norms, congregations affirm that **children's curiosity, energy, and presence are gifts to be celebrated**, not distractions to be managed.

With thoughtful care, careful curation, and consistent evaluations, Praygrounds can become a blessing to the congregation and community, drawing all deeper into the worship of God.

Photo of children's worship space at First UMC in Eugene:

Questions to ask ourselves at FCC:

How do we make worship accessible for all participants?

What does it mean for children to be treated like equal members of the body of Christ?

How are children currently experiencing worship? Are they active participants or do we expect them to be seen and not heard?

What do children see if they're sitting at the back of the church or behind a tall adult?

Are there ways we can adapt both our actions and our space to make it more welcoming and hospitable to children? What do we lose when we do this? What do we gain?

How might our worship space lend itself to a Prayground?

But …

A Praygound will be too noisy and distracting. Having children in worship means we will hear children. However, with guidance, children can and do self-regulate. Selecting quiet toys, inviting older children to help shepherd younger children, and giving time for children to get used to what happens in the sanctuary can mitigate the noise concern. It might take 4-6 months with increasing lengths of time spent in worship for both children and adults to acclimate to a new arrangement. Sometimes a child's joy can serve as the sermon to a member.

Children need to learn how to behave in worship and adapt to our environment. A Prayground can challenge expectations and views of children and their place in society. But welcoming children as children doesn't mean unleashed chaos because a dedicated space in the sanctuary must have a clear purpose and boundaries. This can be shared with families and children in the form of a covenant (see example in this presentation). We can also remember that God's desire to be with us and receive our worship isn't contingent on our behavior.

This is worship time, not play time. A Prayground is an intentional space, and the church must help children understand what the space is for. However, adults must remember how important play is for a child's learning, allowing them to explore ideas, practice skills, and make meaning in ways that are natural, engaging, and developmentally appropriate. In churches, play can be an important aspect of spiritual formation, giving children opportunities to experience and embody the rhythm, symbols, and language of worship in hands-on ways. Churches can encourage play in this specific direction.

Sample Covenant for Prayground

The Prayground is a place for children to worship through play, creativity, and movement.

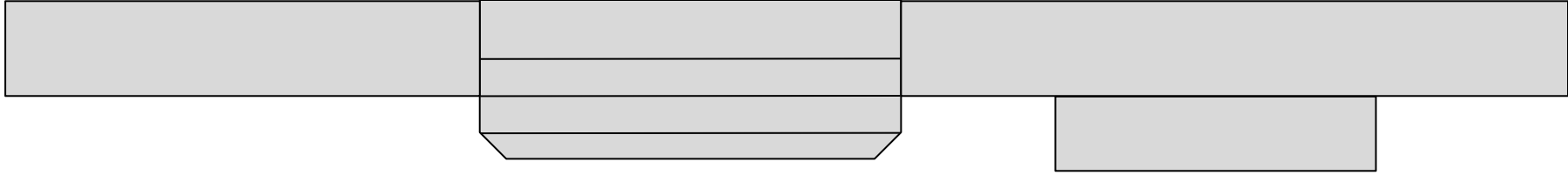
To keep it safe, worshipful, and welcoming, we agree to:

1. **Use quiet voices so everyone can hear and participate in worship.**
2. **Share materials kindly so all have a chance to use them.**
3. **Care for the space by treating items gently and returning them to their place before leaving.**
4. **Respect worship by using the space in ways that help us focus on God together.**
5. **Welcome everyone who comes to the prayground.**

The prayground is a part of our shared worship life.
Thank you for helping it to be a space where all can draw closer to God!

Every church is different and one church's experience with their Prayground is not something that we can replicate at our church. That's just not really the way the Holy Spirit works, nor is it the way God's people work.

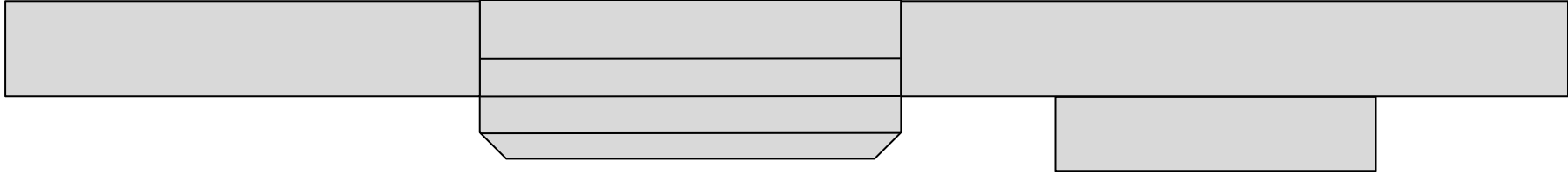
We want to encourage our congregation to think about the ideas behind a Prayground – the creativity, accommodation, and space where children can experience the radical hospitality of Jesus.



Proposed Prayground Space: Front Right of Sanctuary

7.5 feet wide

13.5 feet deep



Proposed Prayground Space: Front Right of Sanctuary

7.5 feet wide