

DIGITAL CHILDREN ENGAGED IN VITAL COMMUNITIES



*Pathways to Congregational Vitality No. 8
Serving the Needs of Leaders in Foundational Christian Ministries*

I grew up worshipping in a church where children were valued. The adults knew our names, they asked us about school, and they expected us to actively participate in the life of the church. We did not spend time looking up and trying to get the attention of adults. They came to our level, looked us in the eyes, and showed us that they cared about what we had to say. I believe that as a result of this great care from teachers like Ms. Logan and leaders like Mrs. Marshall, the majority of children who grew up in this congregation continue to attend and serve the church in the communities where we now live as adults. The relationships formed through the care shown by the adults in the congregation gave us a sense of belonging and created an atmosphere of love.

As a young adult, I worshipped in a congregation that created a similar atmosphere. Children actively engaged in all aspects of the life of the church, from greeters, acolytes and liturgists to creating and participating in missions in the community. As adults, we knew the children by name, and spent time listening to their thoughts and observations. I realize that all congregations are not intentional about children's faith formation, but certainly God calls for that intentionality. We see this as Jesus blesses children (*Matthew 19.13-14*).

Ministry with children is not about teaching children to sit still in worship. It is not about making crafts or keeping children busy. Ministry with children is about laying a foundation for them that is built on the love of God, allowing them to use their God-given gifts to grow in faith and continue the work of living out God's work in the world.

TODAY'S CHILD

Today, the children we serve are born surrounded by more technological advances than many of us could have ever imagined. Over the years, we became very good at informing children, but we must also invest deeply in children's formation.

Today's family unit is more diverse. Studies show that children growing up in homes where they feel secure and loved, fare better than those children who do not, no matter the family structure.

Research by *The Children's Defense Fund* found that one in five children in the United States lives at or below the poverty line. Hispanic Americans make up the highest percentage, followed by African Americans, with a significant rise in the percentage of Caucasian children. Children of immigrants are the most deeply impacted by poverty. This means that during those pivotal years of brain development – birth to three – the digital generation is growing up in circumstances that can be devastating to their overall well-being.

*The Kaiser Report*¹ found that the average eight- year old is exposed to some form of media nearly 56 hours a week, with 37 of those hours in actual media usage. This does not include texting or talking on the telephone, and includes less than 5 hours spent on print media.

¹ GENERATION M2 Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds: A Kaiser Family Foundation Study (JANUARY 2010)

These same eight- year olds – who have been followed since infancy – report being less happy than their peers who spend more time face-to-face and engaged with others.

For the digital child, education changes rapidly. More children will enter the doors of the classroom ill prepared and with minimal access to quality books and resources. This effects their physical development and their ability to learn. With budget cuts, classroom size is on the rise. Teachers, even exceptional teachers, are stretched to teach and nurture children in a way that is appropriate for their development. This impacts all children and offers the opportunity for us to meet evident needs.

John Wesley set the example for us as Methodists as he began health clinics and schools for children to learn to read and encouraged the pastors to meet with the children regularly. His call to meet the needs of people where they were stands as a marker for us today. Using our buildings, that otherwise might sit empty six days a week, to meet the physical, mental, and emotional needs of children and their families clearly meets Wesley's expectations.²

WHAT EVERY CHILD SHOULD EXPERIENCE

Children are born with an innate sense of wonder and faith that is genuine and real. As teachers and leaders, our role is to provide a foundation of experiences on which children build a life of learning and growth toward a mature and vital faith. With intentional learning and Christian formation, we become the people God calls us to be. As leaders in ministry with children, as we develop our gifts we can more faithfully encourage and guide children through their own journey of faith. Remember the words of Jesus, “Let the children come

to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs,” (Mark 10.14b). We keep this scripture before us, knowing that God is with us and equipping us to care for the children in our congregations and communities to form disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Children need to experience the same Bible stories and Christian concepts at several different stages of their faith journey, because their ability to understand the



² *Child Care and the Church*, Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church

concepts continues to evolve as they grow. Children develop in similar ways, although, their development may vary according to their individual stages of cognitive, social-emotional, physical and spiritual development, learning styles, and ability levels. We must remain aware that children possess different abilities at different ages and that some children may live with a disability or developmental delay in some areas, and equip ourselves to meet individual needs.

In his essay, *John Wesley and Children*, Richard Heitzenrater stated, “young people were often the core of local revivals, and Wesley occasionally noted that their transformed lives became models for adults.”³

We sometimes forget children’s capacity to understand, interpret, and respond in ways that are more aligned to true discipleship than many adults. “God begins his work in children... Thus the flame spreads to those of riper years; till at length they all know him, and praise him from the least unto the greatest.”⁴



WHY ALL OF OUR CONGREGATIONS SHOULD BE SAFE SANCTUARIES®

In 1996, The General Conference of the United Methodist Church adopted the Resolution, *Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church* that is undergirded by our Social Principles that states, “children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional and sexual exploitation and abuse” (¶ 162C). The church is a community of faith that is to be a safe sanctuary where children may learn and grow in faith, therefore we must live into our covenant relationship with God to care for children.

The United Methodist Church is the leader in addressing issues of child sexual abuse, as other denominations utilize Safe Sanctuaries® for implementing policies and procedures as well as training. Sample policies, procedures, prevention curriculum, and educational resources for

³ Bunge, Marcia J.; *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eardmans Publishing, 2001)

⁴ Wesley, John; *Journal and Diaries VI* (June 8, 1784), in *Works*, 23:315.

training and healing are available through the General Board of Discipleship. Congregations should look to the GBOD and the annual conference Safe Sanctuaries® representative to develop and implement ongoing policies and behaviors that will reduce the risk of child sexual abuse in the church.

COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP

In our United Methodist tradition, we recognize that everyone is welcome at God's table. The table, whether it is the table of our Lord or our dinner table, is a place where relationship and communication can deepen through love and grace. This is a place to fellowship and connect with others. It is a place where there can be understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It is a place where we can learn the meaning of discipleship.



The child born into the digital age may find it difficult to experience blocks of time for quiet and stillness. Sometimes we wrongly believe that children need to be in constant motion to learn and connect with the world, but anyone who spends quality time with children knows that it is within the quiet and the face-to-face that relationships deepen and connections strengthen.

Relationship and communication are vital in faith formation. This can only be established by listening to and engaging with children. So often children must sit and listen to all that we have to say and we fail to take the time to listen to what they have to offer. Our children have much to offer. Listening to children and engaging with them allows us to gain a deeper understanding of what they are feeling and experiencing, as well as what they are learning and observing.

“To initiate the child into the Christian mystery is to initiate the child into the mystery of life” – The Religious Potential of the Child, Sophia Cavalletti

Two people who knew that best were Maria Montessori and Sophia Cavalletti. These two friends set the foundation for how we can use the best developmental practices to form our children. We learned from them that children learn through experiences, as they are concrete learners. We must also respect that children have the ability to show empathy and think

deeply. Children come to us filled with God's love and the innate sense of God. It is essential to share scripture with them. This needs to be balanced with identifying and developing their God-given gifts that will help us to help them grow closer to God "by themselves."⁵

MODEL GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE FOR ALL GOD'S CHILDREN

Our faith development is critical, not only in our journey through life; but for those of us who work in children's ministries, it is important for us to know who we are and why we do what we do. What is our identity as Christians? Why do we teach young children? By knowing the answers, the children that we serve will be better equipped to answer these questions for themselves as they transition from child to youth to adult. Children thrive in a community of faith where children are given opportunities to develop relationships with adults who are continuing to grow in love of God. In equipping our children as disciples of Jesus Christ, it is also important that we provide opportunities for them to connect with others, resources that are interesting and age-appropriate, and experiences that will help them to make choices that are pleasing to God.

WHAT IF THERE ARE NO CHILDREN IN THE CONGREGATION?

"The church is to be where God is. The church, therefore, must be in community with children and the poor – as Jesus said, "the least of these" (*Children and Poverty: The Bishops' Initiative on Matthew 25.40*). Many of us can look around our sanctuaries and see that there are no children present, but that does not mean that there are no children to serve. In our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, we must go out into the community to serve children who are in need. This may mean a cooperative ministry with other faith communities or it may mean ministry specific to a particular need that no one is addressing for the children of the community.

QUESTIONS TO ASK OURSELVES

MODELING — What are children learning through observing our behavior? How do we, as adults, use the Bible? How do we interact with one another? How do we create healthy boundaries?

COMMUNICATION — Are our children learning healthy face-to-face communication? How can we be more fully engaged in our encounters with children?

RELATIONSHIPS — Are children building deep relationships with others? How are we

⁵ Cavalletti, Sophia; *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children* (Liturgy Training Publications, 1992)

creating opportunities for intergenerational ministries and activities?

INFORMATION — Are adults staying informed on the most appropriate ways to help children grow in faith? Do we participate in the newest developments so that we can guide children well? How are we engaged in conversation with others in the congregation, the community, and the schools to support one another in the formation of children?

COMMUNITY — Are children active participants in worship every week? How do we form worship so that children can participate in ways that are developmentally appropriate? How do we serve the community side-by-side with children?

BABIES — IT IS NEVER TOO EARLY

During the first three years of life, little ones' brains are undergoing millions of changes. What they experience during these years will impact them for a lifetime. They are learning self-control and in need of nurture. This is the time when they have lots of “drive” and learn at amazing rates. They use all of their senses to learn, and we should provide multiple experiences for them to learn through their senses to grow in faith. This includes sharing music with lyrics that tell of God's love, and face-to-face communication that exemplifies the love of God. Sharing the stories of our faith with infants and toddlers builds relationships through Jesus Christ. These stories and relationships are essential as children develop.

TWEENS — THERE IS LIFE BEFORE CONFIRMATION

At Baptisms, we promise to “surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness that they may grow in their service to others . . .” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 40). The year before confirmation, children often hear the words “next year” on a regular basis. What about this year? We owe it to our children during this time of great change to address their immediate needs. Fairness is important to them. This is an important time to engage with them on justice issues. They have questions about life, and we should equip ourselves as good listeners. They still enjoy stories and storytelling, so we should share the Bible with them in ways that connect them with people of the Bible with whom they share similar characteristics.

WHAT THE DIGITAL CHILD NEEDS FROM THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

- A vital disciple-making congregation provides developmentally appropriate, multiple and ongoing opportunities for children, birth to age eleven, to participate fully in the life of the church.
- A vital disciple-making congregation advocates for the safety, welfare, education, health,

and equity for all children in the community so that they may grow into the fullness of their God-given gifts.

- A vital disciple-making congregation ministers to the spiritual needs and faith development of children as they are essential in laying a strong foundation for those who will move the church into the next generation.

LEARNING AND RESOURCES

The biennial *United Methodist Conference on Ministry with Children*, offered by the General Board of Discipleship, is an opportunity for those engaged in ministry with children to gather to grow spiritually and cultivate relevant skills for guiding the spiritual and faith development of children. Teachers, leaders, pastors, children's advocates, preschool directors, annual conference staff, and anyone committed to the faith formation of children participate in workshops, panel discussions, networking, discussion groups, and worship experiences led by exceptional leaders in children's ministry. July 22-26, 2013 in Greenville, South Carolina – Register at gbod.org/children

Children's Ministry Forum offered by the United Methodist Large Church Initiative and the General Board of Discipleship is the opportunity for Children ministry leaders serving in congregations of 1,000 or more members gather to exchange ideas, learn new leadership skills, and to develop new ideas through discussion and networking. Scheduled for 2014.



RESOURCES

- The writer of this booklet: Melanie C. Gordon, Director, Ministry with Children, Leadership Ministries Division, GBOD mgordon@gbod.org
- *Guidelines in Children's Ministries: Ministries That Help Children Grow in Faith*, by Melanie C. Gordon (Nashville: Cokesbury, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-426-73643-8). Booklet that covers planning for a comprehensive children's ministry in the local church.
- *What Every Child Should Experience: A Guide for Leaders and Teachers in United Methodist Congregations*, by Melanie C. Gordon (GBOD). No Cost. Comprehensive scope and sequence supports teachers and leaders in addressing the scriptural, developmental and formational needs of children.

- *Safe Sanctuaries – Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth*, by Joy Melton (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-88177-543-3). Practical guidance is provided in developing and implementing a substantive, holistic plan of abuse prevention.
- *Real Kids, Real Faith – Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives*, by Karen Marie Yust (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004. ISBN 978-0-78796-4078). Insight and helpful tips for nurturing children’s spiritual development.
- *Baptism: Understanding God’s Gift*, by Edward and Sara Webb Phillips (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2013. ISBN 978-0-88177-599-0) A guide for parents and guardians preparing to present their children for baptism and for those who seek a straightforward resource on baptism.
- *Guidelines for Weekday Preschools in United Methodist Church: Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Ministry Programs*, by Gail Callis, Lynne Paredes, and Melanie C. Gordon (GBOD). No Cost. Lays out the basic guidelines for administrating an effective weekday preschool ministry in United Methodist churches.
- *Pockets Magazine* (upperroom.org/bookstore). Devotional magazine that helps children learn more about God with their families.
- *Web-Based Training* (GBOD). No cost. Connects leaders and teachers engaged in ministry with children the opportunity to learn new skills and address timely issues with leaders in specific areas that concern faith formation of children.
- *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* by Catherine Stonehouse (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998. ISBN 978-0-8010-5807-3). How the spiritual life of a child develops and how caring parents and teachers can enhance this development.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION ON MINISTRY WITH CHILDREN

- gbod.org/children
- Blog: ministrywithchildren.wordpress.com
- Twitter: [@m_gordon_umc](https://twitter.com/m_gordon_umc)
- Facebook: UM Ministry with Children Group



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