

# **Building Faithful Communities for the Future**

## **Research Findings**

*Lilly Endowment's Nurturing Children Through Worship & Prayer Initiative*  
Prepared for the United Church of Christ

November 15, 2023

## Agenda

- Research Methodologies
- Key Themes & Supporting Insights
- Suggested Research Needs
- Initial Website Ideas

## Research Methodologies: Focus Groups

### **Parents**

- One focus group of four parents
  - Attended churches in mainly suburban areas in Wisconsin, Tennessee and South Carolina
  - Children's ages ranged from 6-20

### **Ministry Leaders**

- One focus group of five children/youth ministers
  - All paid staff members
  - Represented churches and conferences in Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin and Southern New England
  - Three serve as program ministers at the conference level

## Research Methodologies: Interviews

### **Ministry Leaders**

- Four interviews
  - All paid staff
  - Three serve as Conference children or youth program ministers in Midwest region, one church leader in Northeast region

### **Christian Educators**

- Two interviews
  - Leader in the UCC National Setting
  - One serves on the board of Association of United Church Educators

# Research Methodologies: Surveys

## **Children's Ministry Supplemental Survey**

- 1167 respondents
- Church clergy and/or lay leaders
- Mid-December 2022 to mid-March 2023.

## **Children's Ministry Survey**

- 162 respondents
- Children and youth ministry leaders
- May 4, 2023 to mid-June 2023

## **Prayground Feedback Survey (after General Synod)**

- 636 respondents (20 said that they made use of the Prayground at General Synod)

## Key Themes

### **AN EXTRAVAGANTLY WELCOMING CHURCH MATTERS FOR MINISTRY SUCCESS**

The Church should be a place belonging to everyone, no matter their age, race, gender, sexual orientation or abilities. Children and youth need to be in a safe place where they are welcome and their identities are celebrated. The Church must be hospitable to all families and reassure them that they have a loving community.

## Key Themes: AN EXTRAVAGANTLY WELCOMING CHURCH MATTERS FOR MINISTRY SUCCESS

### What we heard

- Children need safe and creative spaces to gather, where they can still feel included in the full life and ministry of the Church. They should not feel like they have to wait to grow up to be a Christian.
- Rather than asking children "what should we do for the children at church?" every church should be asking "How can we support children in THEIR ministry?"
- Many parents are hesitant to bring their children to church because they fear that the children may bother older congregation members if they cannot sit still for the whole service.

**Survey says:** 29% of survey respondents (supplemental) indicated they have neurodivergent youth attending their church.

## Key Themes: AN EXTRAVAGANTLY WELCOMING CHURCH MATTERS FOR MINISTRY SUCCESS

### **Actions for consideration**

- Examples of what faith commonly looks like in action at varying ages.
- Resources on how best to serve neurodiverse children.



## Key Themes

### **CHURCHES STRUGGLE TO ACCOMMODATE TO FAMILIES' EVERYDAY LIFE**

It is increasingly common for both parents to work full-time, which means weekends are consumed by obligations (i.e. additional jobs, housework, children's sports, grocery store shopping, dinners with friends, and birthday parties). Most families can't commit half a Sunday to church.

If the Church wants to be a purposeful place for spiritual growth, it must rethink its positioning, offerings and processes to accommodate families' busy schedules, and potentially even provide relief for parents. Families will most likely never become "regular" attendees of Sunday services, and churches must accept this. The Church must accept that it is a portal for spiritual growth, not a time or destination. It should offer families multiple ways and times to engage, expanding the often narrow perspective to what makes an "engaged family".

## Key Themes: CHURCHES STRUGGLE TO ACCOMMODATE TO FAMILIES' EVERYDAY LIFE

### What we heard

- Sunday morning church service often conflicts with family obligations and extracurricular activities like sports, which parents believe are important social outlets for their children.
- Ministry leaders found that many parents are overwhelmed with responsibilities and appreciate having a free, enriching childcare option.

**Survey Says:** Only 4% of survey respondents (supplemental) indicated that they have childcare at their church to help parents who want to attend service or another church-sponsored event.

## Key Themes: CHURCHES STRUGGLE TO ACCOMMODATE TO FAMILIES' EVERYDAY LIFE

### **Actions for Consideration**

- Churches must meet parents and children where they are, enhances families' lives and provides reprieve, not an obligation.
- Exploring alternative times and settings for programming.
- Faith formation resources of the future need to be:
  - Flexible and usable at other times in the week.
  - Take seriously that participants may be at church only once a month or less.
  - Speak to the real issues of kids' lives today at least as much as they teach Bible stories.

## Key Themes

### **SPIRITUALLY DEVELOPING PARENTS ARE KEY TO CHILDREN'S FAITH INTERESTS**

Parents' spiritual lives are imperative to children's faith formation. Parents are gatekeepers, funders, coordinators, and transporters for their children, shaping their children's experiences.

Parents carry a deep influence on children's beliefs and interests early in life. So, if the Church wants to help inspire vibrant and relevant children's ministries, parents must be open to exploring or deepening their faith.

## Key Themes: SPIRITUALLY DEVELOPING PARENTS ARE KEY TO CHILDREN'S FAITH INTERESTS

### What we heard

- Today's young parents grew up in a culture where church has been on the decline, so the Church must actively reach out to and radically accept families to bring this next generation of parents and their children.
- More than based on denomination, parents are increasingly choosing which church to attend based on the values that they want to teach their children. Some parents reported switching to a church of another denomination once they had children because it aligned more with their values than the denomination that they grew up in.

## Key Themes: SPIRITUALLY DEVELOPING PARENTS ARE KEY TO CHILDREN'S FAITH INTERESTS

### **Actions for Consideration**

- Develop easy-to-use curricula for parents that help them:
  - Understand what they believe for themselves.
  - Put that own faith into words.
  - Learn strategies and practices for living their faith out loud at home with their children.
- Create church-sponsored volunteer opportunities and hands-on activities that provide self-fulfillment and encourage children to act out the Bible's lessons.

## Key Themes

### **INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING IS IMPERATIVE TO STRONGER CONNECTION**

Many church leaders acknowledge that creating spaces that foster intergenerational engagement are important to the overall health of their church, however, programming that aligns with this imperative seems to lag behind the desire to make this shift. There's an opportunity to more intentionally place children within the fabric of the church, from worship participation to contributions during council leadership. The more exposure children have to adults and seniors at church creates deeper belonging, promotes safety and advances the church's collective purpose in the community.

## Key Themes: INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING IS IMPERATIVE TO STRONGER CONNECTION

### What we heard

- Children's ministers and parents want their congregations to recognize children as just as important as their oldest members.
- The Church needs to be a 'third space' where everyone can be authentically themselves, feels welcomed and is encouraged to be involved members of their the faith community.
- It's important to strike the balance between being attuned to individual congregation members' needs and fostering community across generations. Churches must have age-specific programming, but also times when everyone can come together.

**Survey Says:** Of survey respondents (children's ministry), 70+% indicated children have an opportunity to serve during worship services in a variety of volunteer roles. 25% of respondents indicated that a child is involved in a leadership capacity (i.e. junior deacon, various board/committee members) and just 7% indicated children are included on church planning teams.



## Key Themes: INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING IS IMPERATIVE TO STRONGER CONNECTION

### **Actions for consideration**

- Develop resources for intergenerational (not multigenerational) ministries that foster intentional relationships.
- Helping parents/grandparents/caregivers integrate faith-based discussions into daily life.
- Forgo traditional, rigid behavioral expectations to welcome children to ask questions and be themselves.
- Create spaces like the General Synod 'playground' so parents feel encouraged to bring their children to church and able to participate in the life and business of the church.

## Key Themes

### **THERE'S A DESIRE FOR PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION RESOURCES THAT CONNECT THE BIBLE TO CURRENT EVENTS AND REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCES**

Children's ministry leaders are looking for supplementary resources that help them introduce progressive theology into existing faith education materials to give a scriptural perspective on today's social, economical and ecological issues. Meanwhile, parents are seeking ways to connect the values and lessons taught in the Bible with the daily events their children are witnessing and experiencing.

## Key Themes: THERE'S A DESIRE FOR PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION RESOURCES THAT CONNECT THE BIBLE TO CURRENT EVENTS AND REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCES

### What we heard

- Parents and pastors desire resources that incorporates progressive theologies.
- The parents who reported that their church had a successful children's ministry program were able to identify ways that their children were translating Bible teachings into their daily lives – in conversation, through interactions with their peers, etc.
- Parents celebrated church-sponsored volunteer opportunities and hands-on activities that provide self-fulfillment and encourage children to act out the Bible's lessons.

**Survey Says:** 5% of survey respondents (supplemental) indicated that their church has hands-on mission projects available to children and youth.

**Key Themes:** THERE'S A DESIRE FOR PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION RESOURCES THAT CONNECT THE BIBLE TO CURRENT EVENTS AND REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCES

**Actions for consideration**

- Encourage volunteerism and experiential faith formation opportunities.
- Develop curricula that helps parents teach progressive values from a faith perspective.

## Key Themes

### **CHILDREN'S MINISTRY LEADERS WANT A ROADMAP THAT CAN GUIDE THEM TO PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS**

Every church is different, and children's ministry leaders are interested in assessment and planning guides as well as inspirational testimony to best customize their ministry in key areas like fundraising, promotion, organization/procedures, program design, capacity building and church policies that prioritize children's ministry. Many need the "scaffolding", not specific activity or program materials. Right now, few feel they have the resources to develop ministries that fit their situation.

## Key Themes: CHILDREN'S MINISTRY LEADERS WANT A ROADMAP THAT CAN GUIDE THEM TO PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

### What we heard

- Children leaders and pastors at different churches currently struggle to connect with one another, but would appreciate a space to brainstorm together.
- Those who have had success building ministries have been creative in how they reach out to families. “Out of the box” actions include:
  - Not expecting families to come on Sunday
  - Going out into the community to engage new neighborhood families and determine their needs

**Survey Says:** Of the survey respondents (supplemental), 88% indicated that the purpose of their church's children's ministry was for faith formation (Sunday School or similar program).

**Key Themes:** CHILDREN'S MINISTRY LEADERS WANT A ROADMAP THAT CAN GUIDE THEM TO PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

**Actions for consideration**

- Develop flexible recommendations that can be adapted to accommodate children's ministries of varying sizes and age make-ups.
- Create models for how faith formation may look outside of the traditional Sunday morning classroom.
- Establish a quarterly meeting where children's ministry leaders can share ideas, pain points, and successes.

## Key Themes

### **MINISTRY VIBRANCY TAKES FINANCIAL COMMITMENT**

Children's ministries are under-resourced. There must be a paradigm shift if children's ministries are to play an important role in the vibrancy of the Church. Financial commitments for staff, program development and capacity building are necessary. Children's ministry leaders - paid or volunteer - face the same life pressures, and inadequate pay or increasing time commitments will prohibit most people pursuing children's ministry work. A well-resourced ministry can attract a dedicated leader and provide them with time to build a ministry that creates belonging and fits the needs of a church and community.



## Key Themes: MINISTRY VIBRANCY TAKES FINANCIAL COMMITMENT

### What we heard

- Paid staff with time to develop programming and nurture relationships with children and families are integral to a successful children's ministry.
- Churches cannot expect parents to volunteer.
- Supporting children's ministers is so important because many get burned out quickly.

**Survey Says:** While 69% of survey respondents (supplemental) indicated they have a full-time paid clergy that is involved with children's ministry, only 32% of respondents indicated that the clergy is solely dedicated to children's ministry.

## Key Themes: MINISTRY VIBRANCY TAKES FINANCIAL COMMITMENT

### **Actions for consideration**

- Ensure training offerings for ministry leaders are accessible. Organize events regionally or virtually. Scholarships might help offset travel and attendance expenses for in-person events.
- The National Setting must lead by example, showing that children matter by including photos of them on the website/social, providing resources and offering children's ministry trainings.

## Research Needs

- Additional parent and children's ministry leader (church level) focus groups and/or interviews, prioritizing minority group perspectives.
- Ongoing surveying to capture ministry related trends, from family and children demographics, participation in various types of programming and overall children and family church experiences.
- Once tools (i.e. website, module/resources, communications) are launched, continue to survey audiences to gather feedback on usability, preferences and interests.

# Suggested Next Steps:

## RESOURCE WEBSITE IDEAS

Evolving search structure for resource website

Goal:

- Advocate for Children's Ministry
- Create a Children's Ministry
- Strengthen Our Children's Ministry
- Advance Spiritual Growth for Young Parents
- Shape a Welcoming and Inclusive Church

Setting: (not all will pertain to each goal)

- At Home
- At Church
- In Worship
- In Community
- Online

Church Size by average attendees:

- 0-25
- 26-50
- 51 - 100
- 101 - 200
- 201+

Resource Type:

- Training/Webinar
- Toolkit/Handout
- Inspiration/ Thought-Starter/ Case Study
- Education Material /Curriculum

Other Areas on Website :

- Ministry Discussion Forum
- Upcoming Training Events
- Success Stories

## Suggested Next Steps:

### WEBSITE THOUGHTS

Child-Centered Certification Modules Ideas for Ministry Leaders

1. Advocating for a purposeful children's ministry
2. Building capacity for effective children's ministry
3. Developing intergenerational worship and activities
4. Creating inclusive ministries for children with all abilities
5. Supporting parents and their faith development
6. Shaping faith education in a progressive church

Include required reading, related tools, questions and assignments.

Thank you