

Meaningful Ways to Attract Families (back) to Church - a Rotation.org Zoom Coffee Chat

Tuesday, November 16, 2021

Gathering summary, breakout session recaps, Zoom chat comments, and links

After welcome, prayer, and introductions, board member Beth Tobin, Deacon, Director of Children's Ministry at Gloria Dei Lutheran, shared some of her current programming for families to start our conversation. Some highlights:

Beth's church has been doing Workshop Rotation Model for 20 years and they love how adaptable it is. They currently offer two worship services with education time offered in-between. They are currently worshipping in person now (about 50% of pre-Covid attendance). They are currently offering rotation model Sunday school intergenerationally for the entire congregation (not just families) – trying new things.

This summer as the staff at Gloria Dei thought about rebuilding community, an idea started to grow, and a connection with Advent struck Beth related to the Luke lectionary passage about a shoot growing from the stump of Jesse. They did not want to start something totally new but wanted to build from and highlight and lift up existing ministries and be truly intergenerational and provide fellowship as well as education. Thinking about "back to our roots," they wanted to focus on faith practices that connect us. Plans needed to be sustainable (it has been exhausting meeting needs of in-person and at-home members at the same time), while being authentic and following where the Holy Spirit led. The idea for their intergenerational program grew out of that thinking.

They met with and got buy-in from several different ministry teams and decided to do a service learning project one Sunday every month during the education time between services. This would allow people to mingle and fellowship and practice an act of service, and get to know one another. The other Sundays of the month would be intergenerational Workshop Rotation Model Sunday school.

The first service project was in September and was the first Sunday back. They did not call it by its traditional name, "Rally Sunday," as not everyone was ready to be back. Instead, they called it "God's work. Our hands. Sunday," which was a national church day of service that tied in well. They put together school kits for Lutheran World Relief. Six different stations were set up around the church, each with two tables of supplies to put together. Stations had signs explaining what to do so volunteers were not needed at each station. Volunteers were

stationed inside and outside, overseeing the process. They put together 125 kits. Turnout was better than during summer events.

Service Learning Project

School Kits
Lutheran World Relief



The benefit of doing a service project that highlights a ministry that the church is already supporting is that those people already involved in that ministry are really excited to see their ministry highlighted and want to help, and others in the church are educated about that ministry.

A group from the church serves a local meal ministry. They have to wrap napkins around utensils, and use about 200 each day. That seemed like a simple project that kids could participate in, so for their second service project event they set a goal of wrapping 1,000 forks. There were signs with instructions at each of 8 stations, spread throughout the church. There was a great atmosphere, with people talking and buzzing and excited. They learned multiple sizes of gloves were needed (especially small ones for kids), so they adjusted the process so the kids could still participate that week and planned to get some smaller gloves for the next time.

Community Food Kitchen



This was so popular, the people wanted to do it again. And a youth said the goal should be 2,500 this time. And they did it!

They learned that people are having a hard time knowing how to talk cross-generationally, more so after being shut down and apart for so long. So next time there will be conversation starters at each table to facilitate interactions.

The next project for December ties in to Advent and getting ready for baby Jesus. So the quilters are leading putting together baby care kits.

Even people who are not ready to join them onsite for service projects can participate in these projects by getting and preparing supplies or making donations.

Future project ideas that the committee is working on based on the ideas and needs of the church's ministries: kits for homebound members (including a virtual "hug"), blessing bags for school education staff, tree planting, quilt group support, little libraries.

Milestone ministries are continuing at Gloria Dei Lutheran:

- Bibles are given to second graders, tied in with a fun learning time and pizza (this year it was "pizza to go" – a way to adapt a tradition and keep it safe)
- Remembering baptisms
- Entering school and kindergarten
- Blessing new drivers (driver's license)
- Welcome to communion
- Milestone Ministries' website has suggestions for monthly milestone celebrations to bring people to worship (her church doesn't do them quite monthly).

<https://milestonesministry.org/>



Seasonal celebrations tie into what people are already doing, and put it in a faith perspective:

- Blessing of trick or treaters during worship.

- Faith-based trick or treating – didn't just hand out candy. Each thing had a Bible verse with it. They are Lutherans and it was Reformation Day, so they tied that in, too. Globe shaped stress balls had



encouragement to pray for others and our world and to remember that God has the world in God's hands. Other trick or treat items included PR for upcoming events along with a treat.

- With Thanksgiving this month, the rotation is on gratitude. Used some of the thanksgiving and stewardship ideas from rotation.org. Made scripture verse cards and prayer jars – good community building projects.
<https://christinevhides.com/2016/11/08/the-gifts-of-gratitude/> and
<https://christinevhides.com/2015/08/24/the-first-step-how-we-got-started-being-more-intentional-about-faith-formation/>



- Help people prep for Advent next week (which is Christ the King Sunday) and gather people together. Make cards for homebound members, activities for kids.
- Beth shared a new resource she discovered from Be a Heart - instead of Elf on the Shelf, Mary on the Mantel, with a little baby Jesus and lots of skin tones available. – the focus

is on preparing hearts for Christmas – includes acts of kindness or service for every day.
<https://beaheart.com/collections/mary-on-the-mantel>

- Build your own worship bag center – kids take what they want and supplies can be changed out easily seasonally or weekly. With two worship spaces/times it is easier to keep things clean.



- Prayer wall – kids and adults use it; theme changes monthly.

In conclusion, Beth said: "I encourage you to think about ministries that are important to your congregation, and how can you tie into them as a way of supporting the congregation and building community and highlighting what is important. I used to worry about numbers pointing to whether a program is successful or not. Then a pastor told me, 'No, you don't worry about numbers. God will worry about numbers. What you need to do is be authentic and intentional.' That is my prayer for you that you be authentic and intentional and let the Holy Spirit do the work. I appreciate all of you and the ideas you have shared at previous Coffee Chats and at rotation.org, including Meghan Adrian and her videos that she has shared as well as how she is organizing her Sunday school lessons for children with parents listening in."

Contact info if you want to reach out to Beth for more details:

ChildrensMinistry@GloriaDeiOlympia.org or tobinb@comcat.net

Chat comments during Beth's presentation:

Ian Grimm: Are the service projects done during the in between service time?

Beth's reply: The service projects are being done on Sunday mornings between our service times and are the "education" time for that Sunday. Our schedule is 9:00 a.m. worship 10:10 Education/Service Learning Time, 11:00 a.m. Worship.

Donna Foster: What things are you putting in the Blessing Bags for Education Staff?

Beth's reply: There is a family heading up this project for February, and I'm not sure what all they have thought of. I can post about it when I know. What ideas do you all think would be good to include? The bags are for educators, bus drivers, nurses, admins.... Anyone working with education.

Carol Hulbert Board Member, Ann Arbor, MI: <https://milestonesministry.org>

Carol Hulbert Board Member, Ann Arbor, MI: <https://beaheart.com/>

We then spent some time in breakout rooms, discussing ideas inspired by Beth's presentation as well as participants' meaningful program ideas and insights. Participants shared quick notes in chat about some of the highlights of their breakout conversations:

Beth Tobin, Board Member, Olympia, WA: <https://christinevhides.com/2016/11/08/the-gifts-of-gratitude/>

Cheryl Sneller: Service Sundays

Beth Tobin, Board Member, Olympia, WA: <https://christinevhides.com/2015/08/24/the-first-step-how-we-got-started-being-more-intentional-about-faith-formation/>

Eva Johnson: <https://www.illustratedministry.com/>

Ian Grimm: Inviting older kids to help lead Sunday school for younger kids with their parents

Carol Hulbert Board Member, Ann Arbor, MI: So many great ideas! Best one: Just give without expecting to get back

Robin Stewart Board Member: Families are excited for opportunity to be together. i

Linda Toth: Idea about a ss child bringing a parent and teaching one lesson

Beth Tobin, Board Member, Olympia, WA: Love of kids goes a long way.

Ernest Farrar - Lunenburg, MA: Monthly outings (climb mountain, baking apple crisp, Nativity trip, museum, etc.) have created intergenerational time for bonding, learning, and devotion.

Amy Wheatley: Just nice to share challenges and support!

Katherine Barker: I love the idea of posting craft templates out - when we did do Sunday School online, I limited very much to what could be done online - not everyone has craft supplies or a printer at home.

Beth Tobin, Board Member, Olympia, WA: Action vs Words, Advertise that activities are for kids, that people are coming to serve people in the community.

Beth Tobin, Board Member, Olympia, WA: Blessing Bags for homeless folks.

Katherine Barker: Thought I'd already posted this - in the UK, a parent couldn't come out to ss unless they have a legal check - is this not the case in the US?

Cheryl Sneller: Any adult that works with children must fill out a Megan's Law form. We always have 2 screened adults.

Eva Johnson: I do Bedtime Bible Stories on Facebook Live and am learning how to use TikTok to reach out to the larger community.

Katherine Barker: Again, we couldn't record children without explicit permission from parents.

Meghan Adrian: We have permission to film as part of our Sunday school registration.

Beth Tobin, Board Member, Olympia, WA: That's so cool @Eva Johnson!

We also asked breakout group moderators shared recaps of their conversations:

Robin shared for her group:

The group spent most of the time reviewing ideas and inspiration from Beth's presentation and talked about how exciting those ideas are. They talked about how when families are able to get back together, they are responding positively; there is a great desire to be back together.

Several members of the group were recording children and part of the lesson and putting a video together to share (keeping safety considerations in mind when sharing video of children). Another member was beginning to record the children to put together a Christmas program to share.

From Carol Hulbert:

Ditto to my group very much having pandemic on the mind, thus home delivery of materials was discussed, including...

- ideas from Traci Smith's book *Faithful Families for Advent and Christmas: 100 Ways to Make the Season Sacred* ([link](#))
- The concept of how we give and we expect to get back... NO! Just give.
- Families appreciate feeling "noticed" and included.
- I love how in the big group, I think it was Meghan Adrian who called this home-delivery concept "Subscription boxes."

Other topics covered in my breakout room...

- The concept of thinking of their ministry as a new church plant—requires going out into the community.
- Gatherings that focus on fellowship and “sneak” in faith formation.
- Ways to connect people to the experience of the season. Example: someone did a drive-up carol sing (have an FM transmitter so that music—choir singing—could be piped into people's car radios).

Ron shared:

Folks particularly liked these ideas in Beth's presentation:

- Blessing bags
- Intergenerational Rotation Sunday School
- Mary on the Mantel
- Virtual hugs for shut-in members
- Build your own Worship bag loan center for kids

Things that have worked bringing folks together:

- Pumpkin Fest with taco bar and Trunk-n-Treat
- Rotation Sunday School on the lawn with outdoor games
- Monthly outings
- Virtual Zoom Christmas Pageant held last year at one of the participant's church; can be done as outreach to community, too.

Most of the folks in my breakout group were still dealing with COVID restrictions in their churches. All churches, except mine, were wearing masks on kids, were not fully open for Sunday school as normal, one church had their Sunday school still meeting outside. Pandemic still an issue. Folks are looking for ways to regain interest and confidence in having kids back in church building. Pandemic was very much on their minds. They talked about the importance of families not left behind or left out.

Beth's group –

Ideas in our group included adopting a special needs dog.

Blessing bags with a “hero” theme for fire fighters and nurses — everyone helps put them together but the kids get to go the fire house and deliver them. It makes a big impact.

Offering a whole community Sunday evening 45 minute youth time. It's a time to hang out, hear a Bible story and then do a game or activity based on the story.

Send the week's Scripture and lessons to parents so they can have those resources to teach their kids. Empower parents; when we do that we are adding spiritual value to their life and family. Because we are resourcing them, when the need arises, they know where to go.

Keep in mind that kids and youth and young adults are looking for action vs word. Advertise that what you are doing is for kids even if you don't have kids. Advertise that what people are doing is coming to serve people in need in the community.

Families can register (for free) for monthly, seasonal, or church year seasonal subscription boxes. Put it out there and other folks in the congregation might just sponsor subscription boxes.

Utilize the relationships that you have built up with kids in the past and as they get older (5th grade+) invite them to be the teachers for the younger kids and invite them to bring their parents along with them to help them out. The enthusiasm comes from the kids. It's often the parents who seem too tired to come to church but the kids are happy to come.

Loving the kids, is a great way to start. When you love kids, kids know it and respond.

We also had questions about how to juggle in person and online learning and noted that families are tired of being online. How do you reach those kids, especially if they are not online?

There was a bit more time for discussion after we had the reports from the groups. Here are some highlights of that conversation:

Beth Tobin: I have heard churches are having people register for receiving materials so you know how much to put together and you aren't wasting materials. Another idea is having seasonal or monthly "subscription box" for families, tied into that month's rotation or the season of the year.

Katherine Barker: I shared the idea of mailing materials to families as not everyone has a printer at home. I have a question about bringing a parent into the classroom; we can't do that, even with their own child, without a lot of legal paperwork - the laws are different in the UK. And we can livestream but we can't record video children. Is the US more tolerant?

Beth Tobin: I get permission from parents in writing to photograph and video children. Others concurred.

Ian Grimm: when we have parents or visitors in a room with kids, there will be a staff member or background-checked volunteer in the room.

Amy Crane: for a family event, if everyone is there, that gives you a level of safety. But you will want to have cleared volunteers in charge and overseeing activity.

Rotation.org board president Amy Crane concluded the gathering by reminding participants of the benefits of having a Rotation.org Supporting Membership; \$45 a year gives you access to a multitude of [creative lessons and resources and ideas](#) that are helpful not only for Sunday school but also for special events and other programming.

Remember, you can always ask for resources and lessons and help in the [Teachers' Lounge](#). We encourage you to share your programs and photos and ideas at our site to inspire others. (Email amycrane@hotmail.com if you need help posting your pictures and videos.)

A few people stayed online for continued conversation after the hour-long meeting ended. Here is a summary of the highlights:

Meghan Adrian: a question for Beth: when are you doing the service projects?

Beth: between the services during our short education time (10:10-10:45 – it's crazy). I am so rotation trained, to get kids in the Bible. Some days I have to stop and think, "Well, I did open the Bible."

Ian Grimm: We talked about special days for service projects in our group. At my previous church on fifth Sundays, instead of having a full worship service we would have opening worship and then have planned service projects. Like taking gift baskets to the firehouse and nurses. It was a full church thing, not just kids' ministry. There were five or six service projects that people would sign up for in advance. It helps with the time issue, but not the offering issue (but God takes care of that). We would have people who hadn't been at church in months show up for those fifth Sunday service days.

Beth: our service projects are once a month, and the other weeks we do rotation model Sunday school.

Katherine Barker: we get 20-25 minutes for Sunday school; the children leave the worship service before the sermon. I like rotation because then I can pick up from where I left off the next week and take several weeks for a lesson.

Ian: if you only have 20-25 minutes, then do whatever you can do to equip the parents for outside of that. Like the illustration using a jar that shows the church only has this little bit of time with the kids and the parents have a much larger amount of time. Whatever you can do to empower parents – I had a conversation with a dad a few weeks ago who was upset because he hadn't been able to get his daughter to church for a while. They travel and show pigs at fairs and it is fair season. He felt like he had failed his daughter. I told him that it was my fault, because if he is on these long drives, there is no

better opportunity to talk to his daughter about who God is and what God is doing. Anything we can do to equip parents to push the Gospel deeper into what their families are doing every single day – that’s where we hit home runs.

Meghan: we did subscription boxes over the summer (4 or 5 boxes) and then the parents were more involved. We sent them to everyone and worked to make it as cost-effective as possible, but we made sure all the stuff was printed out as not everyone has a printer. This was when the church was closed. She was recording a weekly Bible story message with a brief activity. In the box for the month would be a craft or activity that went with each week’s lesson/video. There were dice in the box to go with a game and recipes. Nothing super expensive and all tied into the Bible lesson. They were dropped off by Sunday school teachers who don’t necessarily feel comfortable in church yet but were okay with a porch drop-off and brief visit. This created nice touchpoints for people.

Linda Toth shared that she has been going on mission trips to Mexico every winter for many years. They did building projects and a kids’ club. They bring the materials all ready for a week of kids’ club activities and it is a marvelous thing, and they do it with rotation model. It’s a lot of fun.

We talked about how resources at the rotation.org site can be used to supplement purchased curriculum, too. It is an inexpensive way to stretch out packaged lessons.

Ian has found that purchased curriculum often does not work well in a small church because it is written for big groups. We talked about how the new Writing Team lessons are designed to be adapted for smaller groups and multi-age groups.

We talked briefly about the wonderful videos that Meghan Adrian has shared at rotation.org and that are available at any time, posted by Bible story. Here is the link to one: <https://www.rotation.org/topic/295011598215931815?reply=667999816474165398#667999816474165398>. She has cut back a bit and is no longer doing them weekly. Her church is now following Workshop Rotation Model more, so the newer videos should tie into lessons at our site more closely.

Linda: her church has been closed for two months because of Covid surge. They hope to be open for Christmas. But in case someone is still working with restrictions, here is a link to “pandemic-era” resources for Advent and Christmas that may be helpful: <https://www.rotation.org/forum/celebrating-advent-and-christmas-in-2020-during-the-covid-pandemic>

Meghan: one thing I have really enjoyed about these Coffee Chats is that there are ideas that my church staff has thought about but we don’t know how to do, and I hear about them in these chats and find out how other churches make it work, and I can take it back to my church

and show them that it has worked. I guess you could say that these Coffee Chats have been good leverage for me to get people to agree to try things.

Ian asked if people have separate Sunday school and worship services, and if people do separate church services for different ages (kids' church). They are starting Sunday school for adults in January. How would Sunday school for kids differ from what they are doing during worship? (He is senior pastor and only staff member, transitioning.)

Katherine Barker – tried separate worship services for children when they came out of the lockdown to reduce the number of people in the church. Because worship services were live-streaming, families with children didn't bother coming anymore to their separate service, so they quit doing a separate service.

Katherine asked if it is not normal to have a short (20 minute) Sunday school when children leave the worship service for the sermon.

We talked about how some churches have Sunday school during worship and others have a separate Sunday school hour for children, and that elementary-aged children stay in worship and only the youngest leave during the sermon for children's worship.

Here are some resources for materials for engaging children in worship:

<https://www.rotation.org/topic/children-s-church-and-other-activities-during-online-worship-services>

And here are some lessons and resources for worship education:

<https://www.rotation.org/topic/learning-about-worship>

Again, it is important to disciple and equip the parents as well as the children.

Cheryl Sneller: in the summertime our third through fifth graders are trained in a special session about elements of the worship service and the church. Now they stay in the church service and they help the ushers (they have their own t-shirts). The idea is that they learn about the church service and then they are workers in the service. We have packets available that connect to the sermon, too.

Ian has found that cutting Sunday school and going to a small groups model has not worked well in his small church, so they are making plans to go back to Sunday school. We offered encouragement in that process.

Thank you for your time and input. We are grateful for our sharing community, and we are praying for you and your congregation! Remember, you can always reach out to us at the rotation.org site for further discussion and also with specific questions.