

Pray Ground Proposal Church Council

Last summer I was hired to a position whose description includes “making the ministry and programs of CUMC more welcoming and accessible to families with young children.” The ministry of CUMC includes the mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” and a vision statement of “a congregation with open hearts, open minds, and open doors, our welcome knows no boundaries of age, race, ethnicity, culture, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, economic condition, physical or mental ability.” I believe this mission statement and vision statement include children.

Since I started this job last summer, I began reading as many different books about children’s ministry as I could get my hands on. I looked precisely for ways to support the mission of “making children disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” and with a vision of making the children’s experience at CUMC a “welcome that knows no boundaries” to a congregation with open hearts, open minds, and open doors. In addition, I continued to learn and grow through new blogs and books, Facebook groups with other UMC Children’s Ministers, and the ecumenical “Faith Forward” gathering I attended in April. In my learning about children’s ministry, I have found that the two most recurrent themes for children in worship are 1) building relationship with each other and 2) experiencing Scripture and worship in new hands-on ways.

Both CUMC’s vision and mission statements as well as the recurrent themes presented by experts on children in worship led the thoughtful discussions with the Children’s Council earlier this past school year, and the resulting CUMC Children Council mission statement:

”CUMC Children’s Council welcomes all of God’s beloved children to grow in relationship with each other as they experience and live Scripture through words, emotion, symbols, and action.”

With this this clear mission, CUMC’s Children Council strives to put into action all the theories I had been reading about! This past year, during Sunday School, children have experience and lived Scripture in rotational studies of Bible stories. During Children’s Church, children have learned the importance of symbols and emotion in worship. The Maker Space, a new and successful program, has helped children experience Scripture in a creative, hands-on way. This summer, children will be taking Wonder Walks as they grow in relationship with each other.

In reading and paying attention to “Intergenerational Worship” and “Messy Church” as ways to welcome kids into a deeper life of faith, with the support of Children Council, the vision of a “Pray Ground” has evolved. A Pray Ground is a worship space that welcomes children to experience and live Scripture in new ways.

We are proposing a "Pray Ground" in this congregation as a gathering space primarily for children, starting July 3. The Pray Ground would be located at the front of the Sanctuary on the pulpit/ stage side. One or two pews will be removed, and a small rug will be placed there to help define the space. There are three guidelines for use of this space:

1. All ages are welcome! Children under six, please bring a grown-up with you.
2. Be polite and respectful of others and their worship experience.
3. Clean up after yourself.

While in this space during worship, children will have their choice of liturgically appropriate activities such as seasonal play doh mats, coloring sheets, Legos, and small toy animals. There will be prompts available for the different activities. I am hoping to have a small basket of Library books that will rotate in and out, as well as the Children's Story Bible that is used for Sunday School. Children will be able to sit in the surrounding pews, at a small work table with chairs, or on the floor.

This is not meant to be a replacement for the bags children take to their pews, or for Children's Church. We know that there are over thirty kids worshipping with us on any given Sunday, and we know that every one of those children has a different way of learning about God. We also know that every family has a different way of approaching worship, and we hope that this is just one more way to provide them that opportunity to worship and experience God together.

For us as a community of faith, this is a big step. We are adding a new element to our sacred space. We are saying "We love kids, and we don't want to hide them in a corner." We are saying that children's activity in worship is a gift from God. Please join me in broadening our definition of sacred, welcoming, creative worship for children!

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Hagemeyer
Director of Children's Ministry
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